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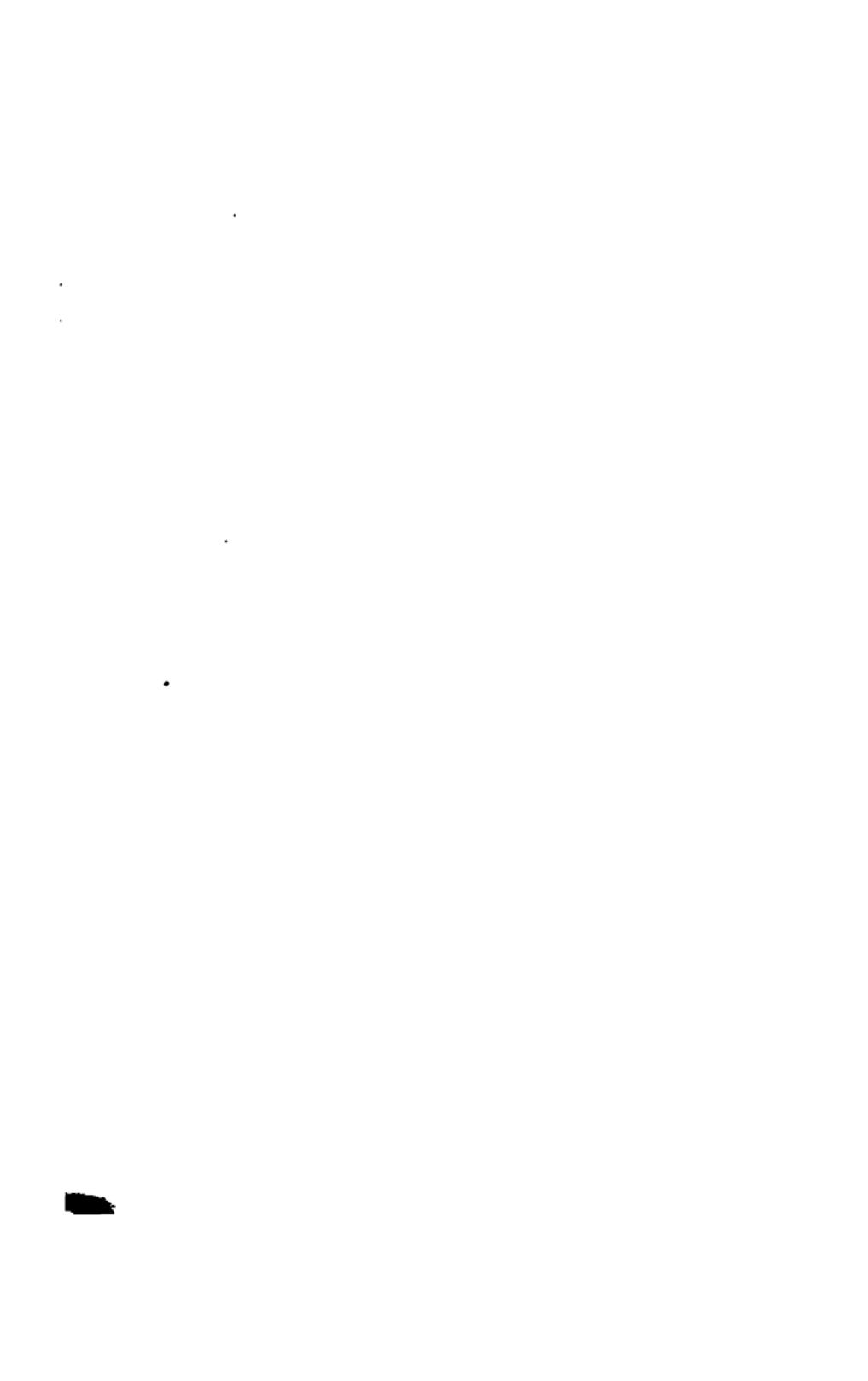
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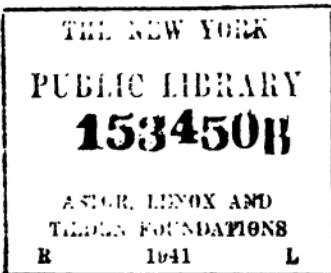
BY THE AUTHOR OF

“TIP CAT,” “MISS TOOSEY’S MISSION,”
AND “LADDIE.”

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LITTLE ANN.

CHAPTER I.

LABURNAM VILLA.

HAVE you ever observed Laburnam Villa, Kentish Town? The lilacs and laburnams grow so thickly in the little front garden, that there would be very little chance of getting a glimpse at the windows, but even that chance is prevented by green trellis-work at the top of the wall. There is not even a peep to be had through the gate, for it is all boarded up, except a little square of some six inches, through which the maid-servant may survey any one who dares to ring the bell, and make sure that it is no wolf seeking admittance into the fold. Under this square opening is a bright, brass plate, on which is inscribed the words: "Miss Primmer, Seminary for young ladies."

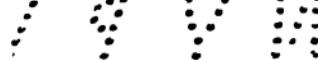
There is something so severely proper about the outward aspect of Laburnam Villa, so aggressively modest, so loudly retiring, that I feel it is quite my duty to explain why, on Tuesday and Friday evening, every week at seven o'clock, a good-looking, *young man* rings the gate-bell boldly, and is at once *admitted, a hawk within the very dovecote itself.*

Miss Primmer would and did explain it as follows: "Mr. Garnett, a most gentlemanly young man, and quite the scholar; he is our classical master, and I esteem his abilities so greatly that I consider our young ladies are most highly favored to be under his tuition, and I deeply regret that this advantage cannot be continued beyond the present term, owing to his having a good appointment in China."

Tom Garnett would have explained it with a shrug of his broad shoulders, and one of those great, hearty laughs of his: "Why, I go in twice a week to teach the little girls some Latin, and very stupid they are for the most part. I don't get much for it, but then I don't know very much myself, so it don't matter."

The girls used to say that Miss Primmer thought a good deal of Mr. Tom Garnett, and that the mature virgin heart beat quicker under that well-worn, black alpaca dress on Tuesday and Friday evenings; but then girls are so silly, you know, and will talk. However, whatever warni feelings might have lurked in the recesses of Miss Primmer's heart were quite quenched by the unfortunate occurrences of Friday evening, the 17th of June. After that date his name was never again mentioned in the hallowed shades of Laburnam Villa, and it was only precocious and observant pupils who connected such remarks as "designing wretches," "perfidious monsters," "vipers that one has warmed in one's bosom," with the late classical master and perfect gentleman.

This sudden change in Miss Primmer's feelings demands explanation, and I will not keep the reader



longer in suspense. Of course there was a woman at the bottom of it, at least if you could call little Ann Nugent a woman ; if you looked at her face you would say she was a baby ; if you could look into her heart you would say she was a little child ; she was only as tall as Miss Primmer's shoulder, her curly, black hair had not learnt grown-up, sedate habits, but was apt to escape out of her net and fall at its own sweet will about her young shoulders and slender waist ; and her Irish blue eyes with their long, black lashes were full of tears and smiles in rapid succession, like a baby child's : just a slip of a girl at fifteen was Ann Nugent.

Poor, little soul ! there were oftener tears than smiles in those Irish eyes of hers since she left her old home in bonny Lismore, to take up her abode at Laburnam Villa, where she was to finish her neglected education, and, in return, make herself generally useful.

“ Quite a charity ! ” Miss Primmer would say, in the girl's hearing, to mothers of pupils who were attracted by the girl's sweet face, “ quite a charity ! sadly rough and wild, poor child ! but poor, you know, and an orphan, and so, what can one do ? ” and then Miss Primmer put her handkerchief to her eyes.

“ A kind-hearted, tender creature, Miss Primmer ! ” said the pupils' mothers.

So Ann Nugent made herself generally useful, which means a great deal sometimes ; she taught the little ones, saw to the practising of scales and exercises, did all the mending of the household,

packed and unpacked the girls' boxes, wrote notes, ran errands, helped the hard-worked servants, was the earliest up in the morning and the latest in bed at night, and learnt what she could in the meantime, which, as you can fancy, was not very much.

She did her best, poor child ; but she was such a willing little horse that every one supplied her with work, and it was constantly : " Oh, Miss Nugent, do just mend my frock for me ! " or, " Here, Miss Nugent, just hear this lesson through for me," or, " Ann, have n't you done that table-cloth yet ? " or, " Please, Miss, could you 'elp Liza with the beds ? " so that her neglected education had not much chance of being improved.

Sometimes in those bright, spring days, bright and sunny even in Kentish Town, when the girls were at play in the little bit of square barrenness they called the garden, little Ann Nugent would lean her curly head on her folded arms and let the table-cloth, with the big darn unfinished, drop to the ground, and dream, oh, such sweet, sunny, old memories of the green, green grass of old Ireland ! of the big lime-trees, and the little potato patch, and the tumble-down stone walls, till she could almost smell the fragrant, old smell of the peat smoke, and hear the dear, old brogue coming straight from loving Irish hearts, and fancy herself once more among the " ould " folk who are poor and happy and dirty and merry all at once.

Or sometimes she would " forget herself," as *Miss Primmer* called it (as if to forget oneself were not the happiest, wisest thing a mortal can do), and

rush out among the dusty lilacs to the other girls, and be found a few minutes afterwards with her hair down and her frock torn, playing “prisoner’s base,” or “gathering nuts in May,” and laughing—oh, how she laughed! it was such an infectious thing that I do not think a mute could have stood it; and only Miss Primmer could keep her gravity, but then she had never been known to laugh, and only once to smile.

Tom Garnett had never noticed Ann Nugent particularly, though she now and then came into the Latin class; she was just one of the little girls to him, nothing more, even something less, from being so irregular that she was naturally behind the others, stupid as they were.

Little Ann liked the Latin class, and made many efforts not to miss it, partly because she really wanted to learn, and partly because she liked Tom Garnett’s kind face and jolly, round voice, that sounded wholesome and fresh after the usual chorus of cackling and giggling with an obligato accompaniment of nagging.

Before that eventful 17th of June, Tom Garnett had only spoken directly once to her, had only noticed her in any way twice. Once when she had not learnt her lesson, which was a very common occurrence, he had said, half-laughing, “I am afraid you are a very idle, little girl,” and then had been sorry when he saw the blue eyes fill and the lip quiver.

Then on another occasion he had become conscious of suppressed amusement among the other girls, and

had found that Miss Nugent had left gerunds and supines, genders and numbers far behind, and had fallen asleep with her head on her blotted exercise book. Miss Jones, who sat next, was just going to administer a friendly poke, when she saw that the master had discovered the nap, but he stopped her. "She is tired, poor little girl, leave her alone," and so she slept on till the lesson was over, with the black lashes resting on the round, young cheek that was paler than it should have been, and the lips parted into a smile that seemed quite insulting to the other girls, who found little enough to smile at in the Latin grammar.

Ann's nap had happened on the Tuesday, and on the Friday, the 17th, Tom Garnett was to give his last lesson, and bid farewell to Miss Primmer, to the young ladies, and to Laburnam Villa.

Observant young ladies noticed that there was a shade of excitement about Miss Primmer's manner that evening, that she had put on her best cap, associated generally with awful and tedious Sunday evenings, and that her hand shook as she poured out tea, and one bold and imaginative spirit even maintained that she blushed when the knock came at the door; but this last assertion was scouted altogether as a gross and improbable fiction. Certain it is, however, that the girls were kept waiting longer than usual in the schoolroom, while the customary little interview between Miss Primmer and Mr. Garnett took place in the little front parlor, *which Miss Primmer liked to be called her study, and which was splendid with crochet antimacassars,*

wool mats, and perforated card boxes, trifling mementos of affection from the pupils.

"Dear girls," Miss Primmer would say, "they are so affectionate, they never let my birthday pass unnoticed."

"No chance!" the dear girls used to say, "I do believe that bothering, old birthday comes every term!"

The interview with Tom Garnett generally only lasted a minute, and was taken up with a few remarks about the weather, not strikingly original, but always very elegantly expressed on Miss Primmer's part, but this evening it was more prolonged and the girls in the schoolroom had time to try all round which of their respective Christian names looked best with the surname of Garnett attached, and quite a fierce discussion arose between Miss Jones and Miss Carter, as to whether Rosetta Laura Garnett or Alberta Florence Garnett were really the most to be admired, and they had already reached the stage of calling one another "Miss," and would soon have gone on to slapping, if Miss Primmer and Mr. Garnett had not entered the room at that juncture.

Miss Cox, too, had written, "Amo Mr. Garnett" at the top of Ellen Martin's exercise, which was a joke of such refinement and subtlety that it exactly suited the comprehension of the girls and was received with a perfect chorus of giggling and, "for shame, Amelia Cox!" and "you tiresome, naughty thing, you!" and Ellen Martin devoted great and elaborate pains to obliterating the words, scraping

away with a blunt penknife, and then adding loops and tails to further disguise what no one was ever likely to wish to decipher.

Little Ann Nugent was not among the gigglers in the schoolroom, though she had set her heart on being present at the last Latin class, and had slept with her dog's-eared grammar under her pillow, and tried hard to drive sleep away from that weary, little head as long as the sputtering tallow candle threw any light on the conjugation that was none the easier to learn from the odd combinations and arrangements which the words assumed, seen by such very sleepy, blue eyes. She had kept the book open, however, under the pile of stockings in her basket, and, by dint of employing every spare moment, had really contrived to learn the lesson very decently, she flattered herself, anyhow, better than she had ever done before. Then, too, she had torn herself from the fairyland of dreams, and opened her reluctant eyes to the dull reality of life at least half an hour earlier than usual, when the gray light was only just creeping in at the window, in order to get well ahead with her work.

But some spiteful fairy had brought the house-linen forcibly before Miss Primmer's mind's eye, and, to Ann's horror and dismay, a grand review was appointed to be held that day of all the linen of the establishment, a regular field day, finishing up with a march past of all the sheets, marshalled by poor Ann. It was in vain that Ann tried to cover defects, to keep holes folded in and thin places turned towards the wall, and expose only the more solid and presentable portions. Miss Primmer's lynx

eyes detected every defect and saw through Ann's manœuvres pitilessly, and one after another the sheets were condemned to enter the mending-basket till the heap was something terrible to behold.

"There! Ann," said Miss Primmer cheerfully, as the last sheet had been brought up on a charge of having been found torn and dilapidated in the linen cupboard, and after close examination had been condemned by the judge to imprisonment in the mending-basket with hard darning. "There! Ann, I think we've done a good morning's work and really, I feel quite fatigued, so just fold up those sheets carefully, and put them all away in their right places, and you'll be able to begin the mending the very first thing after dinner, for I'll give you a holiday from the arithmetic class and French reading, and—well, I'm afraid I'm letting you be sadly idle, but if you're a good girl and do those darns really well, I'll let you off the Latin as well, quite a holiday for you, Ann," and, with an engaging smile, Miss Primmer rose from her seat, shook out her skirts, picked a thread off her sleeve carefully and left Ann to her holiday.

Ann, I am sorry to say, shook her small fist at the basket of linen when Miss Primmer was well out of sight, and then proceeded to do what the girls called "making a face" at the door through which that worthy lady had disappeared, though what the unoffending door had done to call forth this display, I am at a loss to say. But she was far from *perfection*, was poor, little Ann. The next moment she was perched on the toilette table, to

the imminent risk of the looking-glass, had thrown up the window, and was craning her young neck and curly head as far out as possible, and farther than was safe, to see if she could catch just one glance of the Punch and Judy, the cheerful sound of which reached her ears, and penetrated to the schoolroom, where it roused the girls from the torpor of English grammar, and changed them suddenly, from apparently hopeless idiots to their normal condition of giggling foolishness.

Punch and Judy, of course, every one knows, without being told by Miss Primmer, is low, and when anything has once been called low, what hope is left for it in this world? It is put beyond the pale of mercy altogether. If any bold and daring wight ventures to suggest that he rather likes a thing thus condemned, what can the refined world conclude, but that a person who likes low things must himself be low? Terrible thought! But what would be thought of him if he went on to confess about this very low thing in question, that it had been the very joy of his existence, and fond image of his soul as a boy, and how that, on one bright, never to be forgotten afternoon he had followed it from street to street, and from square to square, and had seen six entire performances from beginning to end, with all the interesting details of the baby, Toby, Shullaballa, hangman, Mr. Hokey Pokey, and ghost, and had gazed on each performance with more open-mouthed, intense interest than the one before, *and had gone home tired, but happy, to the bosom of his family*, and how that, even now in riper years,

the old predilection continues strong as ever, and great moral strength is required to prevent his steps loitering on the way, and straying from the direct line of duty, when those magic sounds are heard, and the dirty children begin to collect down some happy side street.

I need hardly say that Miss Primmer's young ladies were not even allowed to look in the direction of a *Punch and Judy*, when they went out walking two and two, up and down the more genteel streets in the neighborhood. Miss Primmer, though she walked behind with the youngest pupil, poor, little victim! seemed to have an innate consciousness when any eyes wandered in undesirable directions, and the sound of the panpipes put her nearly as much on the alert as meeting a boy's school, and a sharp poke from the point of Miss Primmer's parasol followed immediately on any wandering glances.

This power of detecting shortcomings must certainly have been a special and miraculous gift of Miss Primmer's, for how else could she possibly have known when the girls misbehaved in church or at family prayers, or when they did not close their eyes while grace was said, but made faces of great disgust at the resurrection pie; for, of course, at those times, Miss Primmer must have been too deeply absorbed in her own devotions, and her eyes too closely shut to be able to observe other people's behavior? Yes, she was certainly a highly gifted mortal!

Ann, among her other imperfections, had an overwhelming curiosity and interest in *Punch and Judy*,

which was, of course, whetted to the keenest edge by the impossibility of gratifying it. I put it to you, if you had only caught one thrilling glimpse of Punch with his head through the halter, or had just seen Toby jump up with the baby in his mouth, and then had to hurry on without knowing what ensued, would not your feelings be intense? Added to this, Ann had the gift, rare, but not often very useful in general society, of imitating the roo-too-too to perfection, and, one night, Miss Primmer, passing the dormitory of the younger girls, which at that time was under Miss Nugent's charge, stood rooted to the ground, while her hair stood on end, and her whole body shook with horror and indignation, at the sounds which struck on her incredulous ears, followed by bursts and shrieks of laughter, for Miss Nugent was giving the girls a graphic imitation of Punch under different aspects; Punch cheerful and light-hearted, Punch low-spirited and depressed, Punch frightened, Punch angry, Punch triumphant. Then followed subdued Punch put away in the box by the showman, and Punch coming round the corner of the street singing. Her last effort had quite surpassed herself, and it brought down the house, and something more than the house, for it brought the full vial of Miss Primmer's wrath on her devoted head, for, in the midst of the screams of laughter of the girls, the door opened and Miss Primmer, awful in anger, stood in the room, candle in hand, calm but terrible.

That night was long remembered in the annals of *Laburnam Villa*, but suffice it now to say that *this was the last of Miss Nugent's performances,*

and her talent was in future kept carefully to herself.

Dear me ! where have the panpipes and drum carried me ? Farther than they carried Ann, though she went as far as she could out of the window, but even so could only just catch one glimpse of the gayly painted front of the show as it was carried by, and the fur cap of the man inside it, for Beta Road was an unpromising place for a performance, with its garden walls and boarded-up gates, and the Punch and Judy went on to find fresh fields and pastures new elsewhere.

CHAPTER II.

IF ONLY !

So all the afternoon Ann spent with the sheets up in the bedroom, and after all did not mind it very much, for she pushed back the toilette table, and brought her chair close up to the window which was wide open, so that the full June sunshine and warm air could come in and tell her of summer and youth and blossoms and love and happiness. Ah, they are rare good company !

It was some evil genius that prompted her to throw an empty reel down at Miss Jones, when the girls were starting for their walk, although I must confess that Miss Jones' hat was of an aggressive kind, and seemed to invite personal violence, having a large bird with an orange-colored breast in it. But it was ill-advised of Ann to yield to the temptation, for an order was immediately sent upstairs to Miss Nugent to shut the window and draw down the blinds, as the sun would fade the carpet and curtains, which carpet and curtains being of a bilious, yellowish gray, which I believe Miss Primer called fawn, picked out with a little sickly green, had scarcely any color that could fade more than it had faded already, and was so intensely and perfectly ugly that any change must have been for the better.

However, down went the window and blind, and Ann consoled herself by singing "Donnybrook Fair," "Erin go bragh," and "Kathleen Mavourneen," at the very pitch of her voice, and with the strongest Irish brogue at her command. But this also came to an untimely end, for Liza again appeared with the message, "Miss Primmer would be obliged if Miss Nugent would make less noise," or "'old 'ernise" as Liza put it, "for Miss Primmer could n't 'ear 'erself speak — and I only wish other people could n't neither, that I do," said the long-suffering Liza, "which it's more than any one can stand aworritin' and abotherin' from morning till night, which negro slaves in the Hinjes ain't nothing to it!"

So Ann's singing was put an end to and the darning went on none the quicker, indeed it seemed to poor, little Ann as if the unmended heap grew larger and larger, and that as fast as she filled up one hole another one made its appearance, turning up malignantly in unexpected corners. There never were such aggravating sheets, such cross-grained pillow-cases, such ill-tempered dinner napkins, such downright spiteful table-cloths. I wonder who first invented darning? Little Ann sharpened her needle viciously in the emery cushion and wished it was his body she was driving it into, for it must have been a man; no woman would have been mad enough to invent such a slow torment for herself or her sex. It must have been devised by a woman-hater, what was the word? something like mahogany with a "y," when you least expected it, she knew well enough, for it had come

one day in the English dictation and she had spelt it wrong and had had to write it out twenty times. And now she had forgotten it again and what did it matter? A word no one ever used or wished to use! But at this point the tea-bell rang and she threw a peculiarly offensive pillow-case across the room and made off quickly towards bread and butter and company. Now it was another of Ann's many failings that she could not come downstairs like a reasonable Christian. That was what Miss Primmer said, and she was always particular in her choice of epithets, but whether it was owing to a want of reason or a want of Christianity, certain it is that Ann's favorite mode of descent was with a succession of flying leaps, two or three stairs at a time, culminating in a triumphant jump of five at the bottom, which would land her breathless but glorious on the door-mat, and happy was it for her, if some shred or morsel of her raiment was not left as a memento on the way. Most unladylike! as Miss Primmer very justly remarked.

Now whether it was the rebound from the prolonged strain of darning, or whether some unlucky fate was still pursuing her, I do not know, but it happened that her agility that afternoon was unusually irrepressible and daring, and she accomplished a leap of six steps with the ease of a Leotard, so that it was quite a pity that all the girls were assembled round the tea-table and so unable to witness the feat. Also it was a pity that Miss Primmer should just have been *coming out of* the study and Liza turning the corner *from the kitchen* stairs with a jug of hot water. The

results were that Ann got into hot water both figuratively and actually, and was sent to have her tea upstairs among the sheets, and the episode gave a fruitful subject for Miss Primmer to point a moral and adorn a tale during tea-time, though it was not so long an oration as might have been feared, seeing that other and gentler feelings were agitating her mind and giving a tremulous motion to her capstrings.

But poor Ann's punishment was not lightened by this distracting influence ; she was doomed to remain upstairs for the rest of the evening, and not even to be present at the interesting ceremony that was to take place after the Latin class in Miss Primmer's study, a scene at which even Liza and Cook hoped to get a peep through the crack of the door.

This event had been talked of uninterruptedly for at least a week, and the young ladies all twittered and nudged one another and glanced at Mr. Garnett meaningly out of the corners of their eyes when he entered the room, to see if he had any presentiment of the rapture in store for him.

“ Mr. Garnett,” Miss Primmer said, clearing her throat with an impressive little cough — “ Mr. Garnett, when you have concluded your classical studies with the young ladies, we shall be glad of your presence in our little study below.”

Miss Primmer, on very important state occasions, always adopted the royal or editorial “ we.”

She concluded with a graceful wave of her hand towards the girls.

“ *Young ladies, you will also attend.*”

“Certainly, Miss Primmer, certainly!” Tom Garnett said, rubbing up his short, curly hair, as he always did when he was at all embarrassed, an action much admired by the girls, who described it as “running his fingers through his hyacinthine locks,” certainly a well-sounding and classical phrase, but not one which met the entire approval of the younger girls, who contended that “hyacinthine” conveyed the idea of a certain blueness of tint, and was more appropriate to the whiskers of the old man who sat in front of them at church, and whom the girls called Wigsby, and who, looked upon as a work of art, was a triumph.

Tom Garnett’s feeling, as Miss Primmer swept from the room, was “Whatever is the joke now?” but he managed to conceal, by severe self-control, the excitement and intense curiosity the girls knew he was feeling, and to go on with his lesson as calmly as if nothing were going to happen.

As to Miss Primmer, she spent the hour that followed principally, according to Liza, in looking at herself in the small mirror over the shelf in the study, the gilt frame of which was so artistically covered with cut tissue paper. The same witness averred that it was enough to make a cat laugh to see her grimacing and smirking at herself in the little bit of glass visible between the skeleton flowers and the nature fern-painted handscreens, settling the bit of velvet round her neck, and coaxing the hair, where it was “just a leetle bit thin” by the *parting*, to spread out and make the most of itself, and damping the front hairs to persuade them that

they had a natural wave, a fiction in which Miss Primmer firmly believed, and pointed out in confidential moments as a memento of the time when her hair curled in natural ringlets to her waist, which was a time beyond the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and, some of Miss Primmer's pupils maintained, antediluvian.

I think Liza must have exaggerated when she said that Miss Primmer "kep' on at this every blessed minute of the time," for, putting aside the fact that Miss Primmer's appearance was incapable of improvement, and that she must have seen that any further adornment would have been merely to gild refined gold and paint the lily, she also arranged the room for the ceremonial that was to take place, and wrote an elegantly expressed inscription in the most pointed and finest of Italian hands on the fly-leaf of the book which was to be bestowed on Tom Garnett that evening, and which was intended to bring tender thoughts of absent friends and past hours to his mind when the waves of— Let me see, what ocean is it? Well, let us avoid detail, and say mighty ocean roll between him and home, and he stands on the scorching plains of China. At this point Miss Primmer was affected nearly to tears by her own eloquence, and had to lay down the quill pen, the feather of which was richly adorned with beads and silk by some ingenious and affectionate pupil, and press her handkerchief to her eyes.

This was the event in preparation — the presentation of a book to Mr. Garnett. Tupper's 'Proverbial Philosophy,' bound in purple morocco, with gilt

edges rather sticking together — a sweet book, both inside and out, and exactly suited for the occasion. Miss Jones, as a special mark of favor, had been allowed to work a book-mark to put in the book, at Miss Primmer's favorite passage — "Souvenir," in beads, on perforated card, with a peacock at the end, splendid in purple and gold, the appropriateness of which will be evident to the meanest intellect.

All was ready, and Miss Primmer sitting in an easy but graceful attitude at the table, the same position in which she had been photographed, when Tom Garnett's step on the stairs announced that the Latin class was over, and that the solemn moment approached.

His was no fairy footfall, that would scarcely brush the dew from the daisies, indeed Ann heard it distinctly up in the spare room even in the midst of a nap, but it apparently did not disturb Miss Primmer's reverie, for she started when Tom entered the room, and gave a little hysterical cry, and put her hand to her heart to still its tumultuous beating, in a highly effective and affecting manner.

The situation might have been prolonged and intensified *ad lib.*, if those stupid girls had not come trooping in after Mr. Garnett.

The scene that followed was too touching for description. Miss Primmer surpassed herself and rose to such heights of poetical eloquence, that she might well have been mistaken for the lyric muse herself. In fact she attained to the sublime, if not *to the step beyond it*.

The servants, outside the door, listened awe-

struck. Little Ann hanging over the banisters, could only catch a word now and then. The pupils were powerfully affected, so indeed was Tom also, but his feelings struggled to express themselves in almost uncontrollable laughter, hysterical no doubt, while he fingered a cigar in his pocket, and longed for fresh air and a vesta.

The end was seemingly very near, however, when, by ill luck, Miss Primmer saw that the "t's" in Garnett in the inscription were not crossed. Not to cross your "t's" was one of the seven deadly sins in Miss Primmer's code, worse even than not dotting your "i's," which she considered one of the chief vices of the present day, and significantly testifying to the decay in manners and morals.

She seized the pen to repair the grievous error without delay, when that treacherous implement, as if out of malice prepense, split and sputtered in a manner appalling to witness.

It was in vain that Mr. Garnett assured Miss Primmer that it did not signify, that he rather preferred the "t's" uncrossed, that he would do it himself when he got home, it was all in vain.

"My character is at stake, Mr. Garnett," Miss Primmer said, in a tone of voice expressive of "death before dishonor." "I will not suffer a book to leave this house imperfectly inscribed!"

I am afraid that Tom Garnett gave way to strong language internally, and devoted Martin Tupper, Miss Primmer, and humbugs in general, to extirpation, but he only outwardly begged to be allowed to *etch a better pen* from the schoolroom.

If only those “t’s” had been crossed, if only that pen would have made one stroke, if only another pen, even without bead adornments, had been in Miss Primmer’s study, how different things might have been!

If only—ah, how many of us have an “if only!” in our lives, that we keep safe in a corner of our memories and bring out now and then in tender moments of solitude, gazing with dry eyes and aching hearts, while we stretch our passionate, regretful hands through the gathering years to what might have been if only—if only I had spoken, if only she had heard, if only he could have seen, if only she could have known the truth—ah, the difference to me! But enough of this, it is a morbid, demoralizing tendency of the mind to dwell upon what might have been, utterly, hopelessly useless, worse even than picturing what may be, so let us return to our subject.

A few steps took Tom Garnett up the staircase to the class-room, nearly upsetting Liza and Cook in the passage. There was the pen on the desk, there were half-a-dozen other pens all ready and willing to cross the unoffending “t’s,” which were never destined to be crossed after all. And why not? Because there also was little Ann Nugent, with her face hidden in her hands, sobbing as if her heart would break, with an ink-stained pillow-case spread before her.

She had crept half-way downstairs to hear the *oration* in the study and had flung her work down on one of the desks in the class-room, as she passed

the door. As ill-luck would have it, the pillow-case upset an inkstand, and when she hurried back to catch up her work and hide at the sound of a stir in the passage, she found it stained in a manner frightful to contemplate.

She was very young, very tired, she had had more than one disappointment that day, and the thought of Miss Primmer's wrath was too much for her, and she cried in childish despair.

“Hullo!” said Tom Garnett, “what's the row, little one?” And then he proceeded to sit down on the form by her side, put one strong arm round her, draw away her hands from her poor, little, flushed, tear-stained face, and kiss her on the little, quivering, babyish mouth.

I do not excuse his action. I think it was very wrong and inexcusable of him, don't you, reader? I am not one of those who approve of indiscriminate kissing. In my opinion kisses are holy things and should be like angel's visits, few and far between. I think they should mean a great deal, and that, when they are so frequent, they become degraded, common and meaningless. And yet, I feel, that if I had been Tom Garnett, with a simple, honest heart full of pity, and a wish to comfort a little, broken-hearted child, and if you had been Ann Nugent lifting up such a sweet, young face and tearful, blue eyes, I think I should have done just the same, and you would not have minded very much.

But, oh, the speedy retribution! there it stood personified *at the door*: Miss Primmer quivering with rage and indignation in every fibre.

Her feeling was so real and intense that it actually imparted a certain dignity to her aspect and her voice.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Tom turned as red as a turkey-cock.

“Upon my soul, Miss Primmer!” he stammered, but she cut him short and *après cela le déluge*.

I could not undertake to set down the eloquence of Miss Primmer’s wrath, and as she went on and warmed to her subject her expressions were hardly fit for publication. Vituperation was not one of the accomplishments Miss Primmer undertook to impart to her young ladies, but that night she proved herself quite capable of doing so, and it might be concluded from her ease and fluency, that she had graduated in the school of Billingsgate and taken high honors.

It was in vain that Tom Garnett tried to strike in a word of explanation, he might as well have attempted to interrupt a steam whistle, and at last he was silent, put his hands in his pockets, screwed up his lips into a whistle, most maddening to Miss Primmer to behold, and waited till she should exhaust herself.

He was more than half inclined to make a run for it, dodge round Miss Primmer, rescue his hat and seek safety in flight, but he had not the heart to leave poor, little Ann to her fate, feeling as he did that he was the chief, indeed, the only culprit. For himself it mattered very little, as little as a sharp, sudden hail-storm rattling about his ears matters to a man taking a walk in April; it is not pleasant

and it stings and annoys him, but it is just a thing to laugh at, when one has got on a dry coat by the fire at home, or it was like a cloud of teasing gnats disturbing the peaceful ruminations of a mild-eyed Alderney under the elm-trees on a summer afternoon, very tiresome, but to be dispelled with a stamp of the foot and a whisk of the tail.

But to Ann the hail was murderous grape and the gnats poisonous serpents, and there was no escape for her, no fireside at home, no shelter and no power to put the enemy to flight. She stood like one dazed, with her fingers twisted together and her eyes wide open, gazing in unutterable terror at Miss Primmer.

The sight of her frightened, young face roused Tom Garnett from the state of passive endurance, that might otherwise have outlasted Miss Primmer's anger, or at any rate the expression of it.

"Never mind," he said to Ann; "never mind! the old lady will be better soon."

Old lady! Miss Primmer stiffened and gasped, as who would not, at such an insult? and then began again with redoubled fury.

"Hush!" Tom Garnett interrupted her, "hush! you are forgetting what you owe to yourself and to this poor child."

"Poor child? miserable, ungrateful Irish beggar, without a friend in the world but me!"

"Poor child, indeed!" Tom murmured under his breath.

And then Ann, waking out of her stupor, flung up her arms with a sudden, sobbing cry like a hunted animal. The movement was half an appeal to

heaven, half an effort at self-protection, as if she would ward off the biting words like blows from her defenceless head. She never thought for a moment that Tom Garnett could help her in any way, indeed, if she thought at all, she fancied that his presence only made matters worse and prolonged the agony.

But Tom took that appealing gesture and cry to himself, and his whole being rose up in arms in answer to it, as gallantly as any knight errant of old times flew to the rescue of distressed damsel. True, it was no fiery dragon or ferocious tyrant with whom he had to do battle, but I think, if Tom had had his choice, he would rather have had to do with a man's fists than a woman's tongue any day.

Anyhow, he took the two, little, trembling hands in his and put one of them under his arm, and held it there, in a wonderfully consoling and strengthening and protecting way.

“She shall not be so utterly friendless as that comes to, as long as I am in the way,” he said.

You see, he had entirely forgotten consequences, and charged the enemy recklessly, without thinking whether retreat would be possible, or whether reinforcements could come up from behind.

“You, indeed!” said Miss Primmer.

“Better than nothing, anyhow,” Tom went on; “and my mother will be her friend too.”

“Pity these fine friends don't do something for her! She might go to the workhouse to-morrow if it was not for my charity.”

“My mother will give her a home gladly, any day.”

"Then perhaps she will take her in out of the streets to-night, for she shan't sleep another night under my roof."

"Certainly, if you will let her go."

"Go!" said Miss Primmer.

"Put on your bonnet," Tom said to Ann, "and I will take you to my mother."

He did not really think Miss Primmer would let her go, he was not at all sure that Miss Primmer's rage would not culminate in a personal attack on Ann, in which nails and fists might play a prominent part, or that it might not relapse into hysterics and tender reproaches, and end in forgiving and forgetting and kissing and making friends all round. This last would have been the easiest way out of the matter, and he would willingly have kissed Miss Primmer herself, if peace and quiet for little Ann could have been attained thereby.

But Miss Primmer was made of sterner stuff than Tom gave her credit for, and she drew away her skirts with a shudder, as Tom led Ann to the door, as if the very contact of Ann's poor, little, faded alpaca would have contaminated her, and she pretended not to see Ann's stretched-out hand or hear her trembling, sobbing words, "Oh, Miss Primmer, forgive me this once!"

Outside the door was a conclave of girls and servants, who had, no doubt, been deeply interested auditors throughout, and it is to be hoped, were edified. They scrambled out of the way, as Tom and Ann came out on the landing, some upstairs and some down.

“Put your bonnet on quickly,” Tom said, taking up a determined position at the foot of the stairs. He spoke rather sharply, for the embarrassment of the situation began to appear forcibly before his mind’s eye, and the girls confided to one another afterward, that much as they should each have liked to have been the heroine of the occasion, and to have gone off then and there with that dear, delightful, wicked Mr. Garnett, more especially as the very next day was that odious English grammar and French verbs, and scrap pie for dinner; still he did not speak to Ann Nugent quite like Augustus Fitz-Arthur did when persuading the lovely Blanche Trelawney to — but every one knows that immortal romance, and the beautiful utterances of the hero.

“Eliza!” Miss Primmer’s voice sounded from the class-room, like concentrated vinegar on the edge of a knife, “go upstairs with that person and see that she takes every rag of hers away, and nothing that don’t belong to her.”

So Liza followed Ann up into her room and helped her get together the few, poor, little things she had of worldly possession; soon done, for they were so few; all the time encouraging her as well as she knew how. “There, there! don’t cry, don’t! whatever is there to fret about, agoing away with a handsome young gent as ever were, and as good-natured? Why, you did ought to be laughing and jumping about, and snapping your fingers in old vinegar-cruet’s face. I only wish I’d the chance, I do! and I’ve a good mind to give warning this very night as ever is, and I’ve often wondered

'owever you put up with it, as was worse than any 'eathen slave, without even a Sunday out to make you feel like a Christian. Don't you go for to leave a thread behind, for you knows her nasty, prying ways as well as I does, poking and peeping into all the young ladies' drawers before they're 'ardly out of the 'ouse, so as a poor, honest girl ain't a chance of a picking, not if it were ever so."

Miss Jones, being of an enterprising nature, found her way up to Miss Nugent's room on cautious but creaking tip-toe and said good-bye in resounding whispers, and pressed a parting present into Ann's hand.

"They're really good gloves, dear, and I dare say they'll fit you, as they're too large for me."

It was very kindly meant and Ann sobbed aloud with gratitude, though truth compels me to record that they were bilious green at 1s. 11½d. and were split down the back after the first attempt to force them on Miss Jones' substantial hand. But the kindness was still there and Ann never forgot it.

Ann's possessions make but a poor show when they are all together, and quite a small parcel will hold them all. When it is done Ann turns to take a last glance round the shabby, little bedroom, with its sloping roof and at Liza's tallow candle flaring and guttering on the table, while she fastens on her hat with trembling fingers.

Ah me! the past had its pleasures after all; bright dreams have visited her under that blue knotted counterpane, thoughts and hopes quite as bright have come to her waking mind in that little room;

the cracked, blurred glass has often reflected a smiling face ; she has danced more than one jig on those creaking boards, and those sloping roofs have echoed back many a song of the “ould countree.”

What had the future in store for her ? After all, what reason had she to think that it must be better ? why not much worse than the past ? And so the girl’s soul stood still and shuddered before the unknown, nearly as mysterious and awful to her as death. But Liza coming behind, with her bundle and the tallow candle, cut short her reflections and she went on to the landing outside the class-room, where Tom Garnett was waiting for her.

Miss Primmer still stood in the class-room with her back turned to the door, examining the nib of a pen with great attention, no quill adorned with silk and beads now, but a matter-of-fact steel nib in a wooden holder.

Tom Garnett felt sure she would relent even now. His experience of women (it was not very large, to be sure) was that it was only a question of time, and that the more obstinately or, shall we say ? firmly any one held out, the more sudden and utter was the submission that followed. But Miss Primmer was inflexible. She stood rigid when Tom made a step into the room saying, “ Come, Miss Primmer, shall we part friends ? ” and she was also apparently quite unconscious of him when he turned on his heel, saying, “ well then, we will wish you good-evening.”

Ann would have run in and thrown herself at Miss Primmer’s feet and clung to her dress and entreated *forgiveness*, but Tom drew her back.

“ Come, child,” he said, “ I will take you to my mother.” And he took her hand and led her down-stairs, she, blind with tears and sobbing as if she were leaving the happiest home on earth, and Tom were a cruel monster tearing her away; Tom with set teeth and wrathful eyes and an inclination to use stronger language than was usually heard in Laburnam Villa.

And then he caught her bundle out of Liza’s hand, and in another minute they were out in the quiet June evening, walking briskly away, with Tom still holding her hand, and the gas-lamps shining blurred and hazy in her tearful eyes, and Ann Nugent and Tom Garnett had seen the last of Laburnam Villa.

“ Thank goodness ! ” said Tom Garnett, “ and if you don’t mind a cigar, I ’ll light one at once.”

That night was a memorable one in the annals of Laburnam Villa, and the smell of vinegar and burnt feathers will always recall it to the mind of many of the pupils, for Miss Primmer relapsed into violent hysterics, directly the street door closed on Tom Garnett, and continued in the same for two hours.

I am told that there really is such a thing *bonâ fide* as hysterics, and I am inclined on the whole to believe it, but it is one of those things in which art can so closely counterfeit nature that it requires a connoisseur to discriminate between them, and it is also a thing where reality and pretence may be mingled in very various proportions. Now I will give Miss Primmer credit for having a good three parts of reality *in her hysterics*, and that when Liza unlaced her stays and Cook supported her head on her

comfortable bosom and called her “ poor dear,” and when Miss Jones beat the palms of her hands, and the other pupils flew to fetch bottles of smelling salts of all forms and sizes, blue, green, and yellow, varying from silver-gilt tops to vulgar corks sealed with red wax, she really was not feeling at all well. I do not mean to say that at any given time, even at those moments when her head dropped back and her mouth fell open and Liza said, “ There, if she ain’t going off again ! ” she could not have got up like a sensible woman and thrown the vinegar down the sink and the feathers on the kitchen fire, and sent the gaping girls off to bed, and packed the smelling bottles out of the way, but still it would have needed an effort, for there was undoubtedly a very sore place in her heart or her vanity or her temper, where Tom Garnett had wounded her, which would leave a scar which she would carry to her grave.

Surely that was a great compliment to human nature which Miss Primmer paid that night, when she let a silly, little, friendless girl of fifteen go away into the night with a young man of whose family and antecedents she knew nothing. Surely this must have shown that in her long experience she had found girls without any of the folly and giddy thoughtlessness that is generally supposed to lurk in those easily turned young heads, and to throw such dangers round dancing, heedless feet, as they tread so lightly along the edge of life’s precipices. Surely she must have found old heads on young men’s shoulders, and have proved that young *blood runs cool and calm*, and that playing with

fire is after all a pleasing and harmless amusement, and that people talk nonsense of the perils and temptations of youth.

Or did she awake to the consciousness of what she had done when it was too late? Terrible awakening, which is like lifting up the "eyes in hell, being in torment." When she said her prayers that night, for I suppose Miss Primmer always did say her prayers, alone in her bedroom, did the words, "Lead us not into temptation," strike her as very awful words to be said by one who had led two others into great temptation? Or did she wake up in the silent night with the thought of the little, wild, innocent Irish girl, who had been in her keeping, who had no father or mother or friend on earth to demand an account of what had become of her? or did she hear the voice of the Father of the fatherless and the Friend of the friendless, asking for the pure, young soul for whom she must answer?

Who can tell? for after that night Ann Nugent's name never passed Miss Primmer's lips. Surely, in after years, when some unusual occurrence took Miss Primmer out at night, down Regent Street or in that neighborhood, she must have glanced with a shuddering, sickening fear, over and above her righteous horror at such painted, brazen creatures, at some of the faces showing ghastly fair by the gas lamps, with a dread that she might recognize a face that had once been innocent and childlike and simple. The sight is terrible enough without that fear of recognition, and should send us all

where the Syrophenician woman went long ago, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit (and ah, how young some of our grievously afflicted daughters are!) with faith sufficient to persevere even though at first He answer us not a word.

CHAPTER III.

TOM'S MOTHER.

"**MY DEAR,**" Mrs. Garnett used to say in after years, generally over a cup of tea, a beverage conducive to confidential conversation with most people. "My dear, I knew as well as if I had been told in so many words that something was going to happen that day."

Mrs. Garnett was an old lady with whom it was very pleasant to have a cup of tea and a gossip. She enjoyed it so vastly herself that it must have been an ill-natured person who did not enjoy it, too, out of sheer sympathy. She did not do it in a casual skirmishing way, like some people who like to give an electrifying piece of news in a postscript to a letter, or after they have said good-bye in a call, as if it were a sudden, unimportant after-thought instead of the sole end or aim of the said letter or call, she liked to settle down to a regular cannonade of gossip, with every detail dwelt upon and elaborately treated, and the commissariat department in the shape of tea and — yes, perhaps a nicely buttered muffin, well attended to.

But Mrs. Garnett's gossip was quite devoid of spite, so, perhaps, accomplished scandal-mongers might have detected a want of point and have thought that the dish would be improved by a little

sauce *piquante*. She was the kindest, gentlest, old soul in existence, with the most unbounded confidence in the goodness and sincerity of all the world, constantly being taken in and deceived, yet having such unlimited faith to draw on, that she was ready the next minute to be taken in again.

And yet she was such an inconsistent, unreasoning, old person that though she believed every one to be so good and kind, yet any manifestation of this goodness and kindness filled her with surprise and gratitude beyond bounds.

She had formed a most utterly erroneous estimate of her own character, which she was rather fond of discussing with her friends. She thought that, having been left a widow at an early age with two little boys and a very limited income, great strength of character and determination of will had been forced upon her, that she had had to stand up for her own interests, and fight her way in the world, and that this had naturally given a want of due genuine softness to her character.

This idea was altogether a fiction. She was one of those essentially feminine, dependent characters who constantly demand, yes, and receive the support which independent people do not need and do not get.

But all the same she would deplore failings in herself, the consequence, as she said, of her unprotected life, failings which were conspicuously wanting in her, and pride herself mildly on virtues which *those who loved her most* could not detect among *the many* they placed to her credit.

It is almost unnecessary to add that this comfortable, easy-going nature was enclosed in a comfortable, easy-going, well padded body rather inclined to *embonpoint*. First-class passengers are generally to be found in first-class carriages, and a two-edged sword is apt to wear the scabbard, and it is generally good-natured people who get fat, and worry tends to leanness.

Her two sons took care of her, and tyrannized over her in the most open and flagrant way, and even Mary Anne, the little maid of all work, or general servant, I believe, is the word nowadays, patronized her in a manner amusing to behold, and gave her the full benefit of her sixteen years' experience in the London world, which was really of great advantage to one who, in fifty years, had picked up no experience at all worth speaking of.

Children always saw through Mrs. Garnett at once, knowing quite well that she was only a big child dressed up like a grown-up person, and so they would paw at her gown and crumple her cap-strings and pull out her watch, and take all sorts of unwarrantable liberties with her, which they would not venture to do with any one else.

Well, to come back to her confidences over the cup of tea.

“I am not superstitious, you know, my dear, no one can accuse me of *that*” (no one would care to do so, as she had long since been tried and found guilty of the most malignant superstition), “but several very odd things happened that day. The *kitchen clock* stopped. Oh, no, Will, it's all very

well for you to say that it wanted winding, but you know it was something more than that. And the postman left two letters in the morning, that did not belong here, and the names on both began with M. No, Will, of course, I know that Nugent does not begin with M, but it's the next letter in the alphabet, you can't deny. And as to the cat, my dear, you should just have seen the way she went on. I never saw anything so extraordinary in all my life, never! She rushed up and down stairs, into every room in the house with her hair all standing up, and such a tail! No, Will, how can you go on so! It was not the cat's-meat man. You know quite well he comes on Saturdays. Tom was late that night. I knew he would be, for it was the last night he was to go to Miss Primmer's, and he would have to say good-bye. So Will and I had our supper and had it cleared away, and Will had got out his books, and I had my work. Well, perhaps I had just dropped off into a little nap, and no wonder, I'm sure! with Will poking over his books and not trying to amuse me. There, Will, leave me alone, do! You should not tell tales out of school of your poor, sleepy, old mother. Tom's ring at the door quite startled me, though I'm sure I ought to be used to it by this time, for Tom always rings as if it were to wake the seven sleepers, and Will is quite as bad. I got up to open the door to him myself, but, before I got to it, there was Tom in the room and he pushed something into my arms before I could see whether it was man, woman, or child, or animal even, and said, in that off-hand way

of his, as if everything had been settled for centuries, and there was no more to be said about it: 'There, mother, she has no father or mother, you must be kind to her. Now, where's some supper?' My dear, I did n't know what to think, and I don't know what I should have done, if the thing in my arms had not given a little cry and slipped down on to the ground at my feet, before I could prevent her, and lay there like a dead thing. Tom picked her up off the ground as if she had been a baby, he always was strong, a good bit stronger than Will, though he's a head shorter, and Ann always was a scrap, and just then there was very little of her, poor, little soul! Then I saw her face first, lying against Tom's arm, as white as death and as unconscious, for she had fainted clean away, and then the sight of that poor, little, lifeless creature was quite enough for me, and I did not ask any more questions. She might have been the scum of the earth for anything I knew or cared, though you could not look at Ann and think there was anything bad about her, but at any rate, I told Tom to carry her right up and put her on my own bed and just be good enough to leave her to me. And Will was standing there with a face as pale as Ann's pretty near, and yards long, having quite made up his mind that Tom had a dead body there. If you observe, my dear, men are always frightened to death of fainting, and don't a bit know what to do. And when I had got her upstairs, and Mary Anne and I had got her round a bit, and we had undressed her and put her to bed, she looked up at me with her pretty eyes full of tears and took

up my hand off the bed-clothes before I knew what she was doing and kissed it and said, 'I don't know how to thank you.' It seemed as if I must have known her all my life, and yet I did not as much as know her name or where she came from. I made her take some arrowroot, and sat by her till she dropped off to sleep like a lamb and then I went down and Tom told me all about it. I don't know what I could not have done to Miss Primmer that night for her treatment of that poor, dear child. I felt so angry, but there! I dare say she has been punished enough for it, and often and often I've wished to write and tell her that Ann is all right and happy, and she need not feel a bit anxious about her, but Tom would not let me, for he says if Miss Primmer feels at all anxious, which he does not believe, she richly deserves it."

When Ann woke next morning in the little bedroom in Paragon Terrace, she thought she was in heaven. Now I need not tell my readers that Paragon Terrace, Hampstead Road, is very far from being heaven, and that even as far as earth goes it is by no means one of its noblest manifestations.

There are twenty-five houses in Paragon Terrace, as much alike as twenty-five peas, with a door, and three windows one over the other, each window rounded at the top by way of architectural ornament, but irritating to the house-maidenly mind when engaged in cleaning. There is a slight variety introduced into the scene in such minor matters as paint, *curtains*, and horticultural efforts, in which the tastes of the inhabitants are displayed. I need not say

that there is the usual sad want of unanimity and good feeling in the matter of paint, no one seeming for a moment to consider his neighbor's feelings or the general *coup d'œil* of the Terrace. Thus for instance, number six was painted from top to toe in the spring and made all the Terrace look grimy and disreputable by contrast, but in autumn numbers five and seven took a cruel revenge and came out in a creamy splendor, making a dusky sandwich of poor, eclipsed number six.

The horticultural efforts varied in importance, from the pot of mignonette and two variegated laurels in number three, to the glories of number thirteen, who went in for great elaborations, virginia-creeper up to the drawing-room floor, and a passion-flower that displayed a fearful, yellow fruit till late in the winter, nasturtiums trained up strings across the kitchen windows and pots of mysterious drooping green vegetables hanging from the bar across the area. They even had a horse-chestnut tree in a green tub in *the* area, which was rapidly growing into a painful possession, like a white elephant, in spite of its poor cramped roots suggestive of tight boots and agony.

Number ten had bits of spa arranged along the dining-room window-sill, which was considerd decidedly low by the other houses in the Terrace, and only one remove from a miniature five-barred gate and railings, which we know is eschewed by polite society. Bits of spa lead one to glance at the kitchen window to see if there is "mangling done here," and one would not even be surprised to see a white chalk *cow in the window* and the milk-cans hitched on the

railings. It really is a pity when people do not understand what is due to their position. Altogether the spa was a thorn in the side of the Paragon Terrace people.

At number seven there was a parrot, a most distressing bird, who was reported to reduce the rent of the houses on either side by at least £10 a year, but I cannot vouch for the truth of this myself, and I doubt it, as I never in my experience found landlords so amenable to reason.

Several houses indulged in canaries.

Do you keep a canary, reader? If not, take my advice and don't; if you do, you have my sincerest compassion. It is not the singing so much as the constant fidgetting with such extremely dry feet on rough perches that is so intolerable. One never gets used to it as one does to the ticking of a clock, it is not sufficiently regular for that, though the hopping from one perch to the other is sometimes like clock-work. A ring at the top of the cage is an aggravation and a piece of sugar is past bearing, with the constant chip, chip, chip, at it and then the brisk wiping of the beak on the perch. If you are reading a well-bound book anywhere within reach, this yellow fiend will be seized with a mania for washing, and thrust itself as far as possible into the water-glass sending showers of drops on to your book, or if you are writing, seeds and sand hail on your devoted head.

But at number eleven, where Mrs. Garnett lived, *there were none* of these peculiarities. The only *weakness* there was the cat Toby, who was a person

of great importance in the household and of dignified and sedate habits. Mrs. Garnett once had a pot of maidenhair fern given her, but Toby eyed it with great suspicion and ended with eating it, which was discouraging to Mrs. Garnett and did not agree with Toby either. And so Toby reigned supreme at number eleven, and regarded life philosophically, after the manner of cats, preserving a profound calm as to outward things, except such occasional displays of feeling as a dog or the cat's-meat man naturally awake in the feline race.

It would have been quite possible to imagine a more capacious and commodious house than number eleven, Paragon Terrace, but none of its inmates cared to imagine anything of the kind. I doubt if oak panelling or marble staircases or velvet curtains or thick piled carpets contribute much to the happiness of life, though they may be agreeable supplements to it.

Mrs. Garnett sometimes lamented plaintively that there was no drawing-room. Other houses in the Terrace devoted the front room on the first floor to that purpose and came out strong in netted curtains, wax flowers and antimacassars, with photograph albums arranged with mathematical precision, radiating from the centre of the round table, a sort of apartment that no house with any pretensions to gentility is ever without, however cramped for room it may be in other respects. It is regarded with great reverence and awe by the household, as something "*too bright and good for human nature's daily food,*" and used about twice a year on grand occa-

sions, with a sense of dignity and elegance on the surface and a strong internal feeling of discomfort and stiffness, and a longing for the agreeable *abandon* of the parlor downstairs.

I am afraid the Garnetts were not at all genteel people, for they had not a drawing-room, and the first floor front was devoted to Mrs. Garnett's bedroom, and a very nice bedroom it was, though not such a palace as it appeared to Ann's eyes the first morning. Tom had the room behind his mother's, and the two rooms above were owned by Will and Mary Anne.

There were evident signs in the house of the preponderance of the masculine element, no antimacassars or footstools, and a slight pervading smell of tobacco. Smoking was strictly confined to the little room behind the parlor, generally known as the sink of iniquity, where were to be found Will's chemicals and Tom's carpentering tools and Mrs. Garnett's sewing machine, which Tom had improved so much by various inventions since she first had it, that now she was quite unable to use it at all, also umbrellas and any disreputable books and generally a hat-box or two and a pair of slippers.

There was only one chair worth speaking of in the sink, and you always had to empty it of an armful of incongruous and unexpected things before you could sit down in it, but there was always a box or the table or the window-sill for the chairless one to sit upon, or both Tom and Will were driven to find a *make-shift* when, as they often did, they enticed *their mother* into the sink to talk to them while they

smoked. She always protested and made a feeble resistance, but it was of no use, and it pleased her so vastly to think that they cared to have her with them that, I think, she would have sat in the coal-hole or in the veritable sink if they had asked her. She used to threaten them with a regular putting to rights in this den, but it never came to pass and any tidying was of a superficial and compromising nature.

As for the smoke, I really believe Mrs. Garnett liked it, though of course she did not own as much, — what woman ever did, unless she smokes herself? when she is scarcely to be accounted a woman at all. It is a tradition universally received by the feminine mind that smoking is to be reprobated; some regard it merely as an amiable weakness to be tolerated, some as more than half a vice to be rigidly discouraged, like drinking and gambling; in the lower orders it is apt to be described as "beesly," and the most lenient, who are anxious to establish a character for almost extravagant amiability, only get so far as to say, "they don't much mind it," with a sweet, martyred aspect.

And yet how is it that ladies always select smoking carriages to travel in? Can it always be chance, and the insanity which attacks otherwise sensible females in railway travelling that leads to this result? I leave this to profound thinkers to solve.

I think Mrs. Garnett remembered a time before the days of Paragon Terrace, when she lived in the country, *and Tom and Will were little yellow-legged blue-coat boys at Christ's Hospital*, and there were

no men-folk about the place to come in with muddy boots, and let doors slam, and to smoke and leave things about and throw all the scuttle full of coals on the fire at once, and kick the footstools out of the way and drag all the antimacassars off the drawing-room chairs, when the house was as neat as a new pin and as quiet as the grave, when her collar was never crumpled and the dinner never kept waiting.

Just the life for a widow lady, perhaps you think, a life rather to be envied than pitied, but you might talk for a twelvemonth in its praise before you could get Mrs. Garnett to agree with you. If anything could have made her thin and miserable and ill-tempered, it would have been that, and I think it was just the holidays when Tom and Will turned everything upside down, and routed her out of all her old-maidish ways and teased and tyrannized over her that kept her alive and made her grow fat and comfortable and easy-tempered.

Fate had been very kind to Mrs. Garnett, her friends said, almost grudgingly sometimes, for it certainly is irritating to see a person sitting still, and happy and smiling, and not stretching out as much as a dimpled, comfortable hand, and yet good things dropping into her lap which other people toil and moil for and eat out their hearts for, and very likely never get after all.

And after all they would say it was the very best thing that could have happened to her to lose her *husband* when she did, though people did make such a *clatter about* it and pity her so. They had not

been married three years, the honeymoon was still spreading its glamour over their life, and they were lovers still, and she had not begun to find out that handsome Tom Garnett was extravagant and idle and a trifle selfish, instead of being the spotless hero and saint she will carry in her loving memory till her dying day.

And then, too, both her children were boys, any one else would have had girls. Well, perhaps boys are troublesome and their education expensive, but her boys were good boys and never got into scrapes and bothers like other boys, and before she had begun thinking of their schooling hardly, there were two presentations to Christ's Hospital ready for them.

She made pretty nearly as much fuss about that as about her husband's death, and declared the boys should not go, and she would not be parted from them, but she was not quite so silly as that, and the boys went.

And when their schooling was done, some old friend of their father's turned up, or godfather or something that other people have not got, and put both the boys into situations in London; nothing very grand to be sure, but so that they earned their living and could help to make a home for their mother. Tom was in a merchant's office and Will in a bank, and then Mrs. Garnett went up to live with them in Paragon Terrace. So Mrs. Stubbs, the doctor's wife at Paston, would tell the story of Mrs. Garnett's life and luck, in comparison with her own, *having a husband with a partiality for brandy*

and water, and six daughters, who did not inspire admiration in other people, and a son who was a lively medical student with convivial tastes.

Now a fresh piece of luck had fallen in Mrs. Garnett's way, though it was a piece of luck with a sharp edge to it, that made her mother's heart bleed not a little. The merchant with whom Tom had been placed had taken a great fancy to him, and offered him a place in his house in China, five years at Shanghai, a splendid chance for a young man without prospects. But Tom sometimes felt that a far more splendid fortune would not repay leaving that little house in Paragon Terrace and the folks there, and more than once he resolved, that he would not care what people thought or said, but that he would just throw up the situation and stop at home.

It was Mrs. Garnett herself who persuaded him out of this intention, putting that ridiculous pin-cushion of a heart of hers into her pocket, and looking at matters in a sternly common-sense manner, of which you would not have thought her capable, proving the undoubted fact that most English women have a strong spice of the Roman matron hidden away somewhere ready to be produced when self-sacrifice is necessary, though it does not appear in classical attire, that picturesque but rather inconvenient compromise between a nightgown and a round towel, which certainly would not have been becoming to Mrs. Garnett's figure, at any rate. And so it was settled that Tom was to go, and he, poor fellow, felt as if it were Paradise, and not

Paragon Terrace, he was to leave for five years. And so, after all, when Ann thought it was like heaven, she was not far from agreement with Tom Garnett.

I think that warm corner must have been standing empty, waiting for poor, little, homeless Ann Nugent, for she slipped into it so naturally from the very first. She seemed to know the habits and customs of the house and where everything was and what was wanted as if by instinct, though it was all so different from Laburnam Villa, or from anything she had known in her life before. She did not take any one's place ; she went straight to the right cupboard for the tea, and found Mrs. Garnett's spectacles four times before breakfast began ; she made such a natural fourth to the party that it would have seemed incomplete without her.

She was so sweet and bright a thing to look at too, although the excitement and faint of the night before had touched her under her blue eyes with a dark finger and stolen the pink from her cheek, that Mary Anne could not resist coming into the room constantly while they were at breakfast, on various absurd excuses, just to look at her, with a broad smile of satisfaction and arms akimbo.

Mrs. Garnett declared when the spectacles were found for the fourth time, that she seemed just like a daughter ; and even Will, looking across the table at her, with those radiant, smiling eyes of his, said —

“ Ann, I think you have been sitting there for years, *only we have not noticed you before.*”

CHAPTER IV.

PARAGON TERRACE.

So Ann dropped naturally into her place in the little household in Paragon Terrace, and for the first two or three days gave herself up to simple enjoyment, of what was so new and delightful to her, just like a flower in the sunshine, or a tree in the springtime, without asking how long it would last, or the why or the wherefore.

The change in her circumstances seemed to have made a wonderful change in the girl, as changed circumstances often do. At Miss Primmer's she had constantly been in disgrace, and not without reason, for rude and unladylike conduct, for romping and rushing about, for slamming doors, for knocking things down, for breakages and carelessness.

“Give a dog a bad name and hang him,” is a very true proverb. If you persistently give a person a certain character, however unlike it may be to his real nature, there is a sort of hidden power that forces him to act up to it. Don’t you know the feeling yourself? So-and-so thinks you profane; you cannot say half-a-dozen words to So-and-so without saying something that shocks you quite as much as it does him. If I was told that I was careless and always breaking things, I would not undertake to carry that Dresden vase across the room in

safety, and it is just the same if people are considered very good, they are good. They are clothed in a sort of invulnerable armor of sanctity, woven out of people's faith in them.

Such a sudden change of atmosphere might have been dangerous to some natures, but I do not think that the love and admiration that surrounded her at Paragon Terrace was of a sort to spoil any one, or force any young plant into unnatural, unhealthy growth, much less such a hardy specimen as our little Irish shamrock, Ann Nugent. She had had more than enough of east wind and biting frost at Laburnam Villa, and the shelter and sunshine and blue sky at Paragon Terrace was very good for, as well as very pleasant to her.

"I can't think however we got on without that girl!" Mrs. Garnett said to herself more than once, even before the very first day came to an end.

And Mary Anne declared that, "the 'ouse seemed that dull when Miss Ann went out to the butcher's along of missus, that there were n't no bearing it."

The work of the house was seriously delayed by Mary Anne's attentions to Ann; she left scouring the door-step three times to open the parlor door, with very hearth-stony hands, under the pretence that she thought she heard her calling for something, a very unlikely thing for Ann to do, though I ought to explain that Mrs. Garnett was not on such terms with Mary Anne that she would ring the bell if she wanted anything, but that she mentioned it at the top of the kitchen stairs, which servants, as

a rule, very much prefer as being more friendly and familiar.

In fact, I am not sure that Mary Anne would not have given warning if the parlor-bell had been rung, though she was not generally sensitive or easily moved to indignation, and she would have done anything within reason for Mrs. Garnett, or for either of her two sons, or even for Toby, but her feelings on the subject of ringing the bell were well known and respected in the family, and visitors were sometimes quite puzzled at Mrs. Garnett's earnest entreaties to them not to ring the bell when anything was wanted, assuring them, with heightened color and agitated voice, that it was quite unnecessary, as the maid was just outside.

Ann threw herself at once, with the greatest spirit and energy, into the interesting details of housekeeping, and got quite fiery discussing the iniquities of the butcher, and the amount of bone and fat he had artfully weighed in with the beef, and she spoke in such severe terms of him that Mrs. Garnett, while agreeing in the main with her remarks, was obliged to mention a few palliating circumstances, such as his having a large family, and one of them an idiot, poor thing, and his wife a poor manager and shocking health, which of course convinced Ann that it was not to be wondered at that the joints were unsatisfactory, and the weight suspicious, and that, on the whole, one could only be thankful it was no worse.

Mary Anne also poured her complaints of that 'orrid baker into Ann's ready and sympathizing ear.

“ I sore him with my very own eyes drop his basket in the very middle of the 'Ampstead road, and all the loaves rolling about in the mud like so many blessed ninepins, and one of them yeller buses came up what runs to the Bank, and the basket rolled right under the feet of the 'orses, and nearly throwed 'em down, and the driver swearing awful, as was racing with a green bus as got well ahead, which ain't safe neither when a person gets in, going on suddent like before one can sit down any'ow, as might be the death of one, more particular when stout.”

“ What became of the loaves? ” asked Ann. “ Did he lose them? ”

“ Lose them? Not he, nor a pretty deal of dirt neither! I kep' my eye on him, as having had words with him along of a black-beedle in a tin loaf, as he said come from our kitchen, and not from his bakus as swarms. He answers up to the busman as impudent as anything, and then ketches up his basket and gives the loaves a lick and a promise with the baize cloth in the basket and his coat sleeve, ups with his basket, and goes off whistling, ‘ Tommy, make room for your uncle,’ as cool as cool; and I sore him 'and in one of them very loaves at the first 'ouse he come to, as if it was not a regular mask of dirt at the bottom, and he kissed his 'and to the 'ousemaid into the bargain, as did ought to have known better.”

There was certainly something in Ann that encouraged confidences, for Mary Anne unbosomed herself also about her Sunday bonnet, which had been an

anxiety all the week, and now, as Sunday approached, had brought her nearly to the brink of despair. On Monday she had effected a purchase, at one of her special shops, of a glorious pink rose, endowed with a substantial dewdrop and a green beetle, which gave Mary Anne rather a turn at first, and made her feel creepy, but that only went to prove how wonderfully it was like nature, and how cheap for $5\frac{3}{4}d.$ — 5 in a fat black figure, and $\frac{3}{4}$ in the faintest pencil.

Coming home flushed and triumphant, she had proceeded in a rash moment to cut off the thing that had ornamented her bonnet during the last few months. I speak advisedly when I say *thing*, for it would be hard to decide at one glance, whether it belonged to the animal or vegetable kingdom, being a combination of crimson chenille and glass dangles, finishing off with cocks' feathers and black coral — in fact it was simple and, at the same time, effective.

This being done, she found the next step more difficult. It was in vain that she sat up to a late hour with her mouth full of pins; no power of hers would induce the pink rose to supply the place of the mysterious trail, or to look like anything but a very independent fact.

And now here was Sunday approaching, and not a cloud in the sky to give the slightest hope of rain, which might be an excuse for remaining at home or wearing her every-day bonnet, the one, you know, which hangs behind the kitchen door, and which she *puts on*, tilted up over her cap, without tying the *strings*, when she runs out to post a letter.

"My 'and is 'eavy in millinery," said Mary Anne plaintively, stretching out a mighty member with a duster in it, "and this rose is that beautiful which it would be a shame to spile it. Don't it look natural? Just every bit as if it were growing on a tree," continued the imaginative creature, with her head on one side, regarding the pink muslin petals with emotion.

I do not suppose that Ann had ever had much experience of millinery, though she had of mending. There had been very little variety in her own head-gear; indeed, I think she could have told on the fingers of one hand all the hats she could remember to have perched on the top of her curly head, only varying in their degrees of shabbiness, and the only proof she had given of possessing any taste in this direction, had been shown by her demonstration against Miss Jones' hat, which had met with such condign punishment the last day she was at Laburnam Villa.

There must, therefore, have been something inspiring in that pink rose, or in the admiring confidence of Mary Anne, as she leant over her, breathing so hard in her concentrated interest that it almost amounted to a snore at the critical moment when Ann, with a judicious pinch here and twist there, a couple of pins, and as many stitches, coaxed the rose into the very position at which Mary Anne had aimed so fruitlessly; and really, when Ann held the bonnet up on her hand, and Mary Anne put her *head on one side and half closed her eyes*, she could *quite have mistaken it for one of those in the shop*

windows, labelled, "The latest fashion," "Quite the rage," "Chaste," or "The Langtry," and, for many a Sunday afternoon out, it nodded proudly on Mary Anne's head, the admired of all beholders.

Ann would gladly have undertaken all the work of the house if Mrs. Garnett and Mary Anne would have consented, and she was quite distressed because she was not allowed to help wash-up after dinner, and she could not settle down peacefully, as Mrs. Garnett did, to the serious business of digestion, according to the well-known old recipe: "After dinner rest awhile, after supper walk a mile," the first part of which Mrs. Garnett had proved to be excellent, but the latter rather inconvenient, so Will had altered it for her benefit into, "After supper sit and smile," which was more in accordance with Mrs. Garnett's inclinations, and seemed equally favorable to digestion.

But Ann was quite contented when she had discovered a small hole in a corner of the table-cloth, on which she lavished such minute and elaborate darning as would have filled Miss Primmer's mind with amazement could she have seen it.

Mrs. Garnett could not remember when she had had such a pleasant day. Ann was such a willing and sympathetic listener to the endless and rambling stories of Tom and Will, when they were boys; indeed, anything connected with Tom she listened to with a sort of reverence, as she might have done to a Bible story, and when Mrs. Garnett described how ill he had been with the measles, she found *Ann's* eyes so full of tears and her lip so quivering,

that she was obliged to hasten to the happy conclusion and assure her that he very soon got better, and had grown an inch and a half while he was in bed, and had never had a day's illness since.

"Was he always so very good?" Ann asked in a low, serious voice, as if it were rather presumption even to question such a fact.

"Ye-e-es," answered Mrs. Garnett, with a slight hesitation caused by memories of youthful tantrums and unsatisfactory reports from school, but went on more decidedly—"oh, yes! They have both been the very best sons in the world. Why, bless me, child, how you startled me! That's the muffin-man; we don't often have muffins, they take so much butter, and Tom never cared for them; but I dare say you didn't often have them at Miss Primmer's, and I must say I like them now and then myself if they are nicely done and hot. Oh, you thought it was Tom, did you? No, he won't be in for another half-hour.

"May I open the door to him?" asked Ann. "Do you think Mary Anne would mind? You can't think how grateful I feel to him, it give me a regular ache here," Ann went on tremulously, pressing both hands to her heart; "and if I might only do something for him, I think I might get better. It's not real pain, you know. I like feeling it, but it's too big, too big, as if my heart would burst with holding it, unless I can do something. Oh, Mrs. Garnett, do you think I might clean his boots? I've often helped at Laburnam Villa, and I didn't much mind it there when the mornings were not very cold, and I had no chil-

blains ; but I would love to do it for him, and I would take such pains that he should not be able to guess that it was me that did it."

Mrs. Garnett's breath was quite taken away by this outburst of entreaty in the soft, rapid Irish voice, as the girl knelt before her with her hands clasped on Mrs. Garnett's lap. The old lady's mind did not travel very fast from one subject to another, and the sudden transition from muffins to heart-ache, and from that to boots left her with a general vague idea that Ann was proposing a very strange cure, Irish, she supposed, for a pain in the heart, " which as often as not is due to indigestion, you know ; and my old doctor down at Paston has often and often told me, that more than half the heart-disease one hears of nowadays is nothing more than too much tea."

So she took Ann's sweet, earnest, young face between her hands and kissed it, and told her that she had some pills upstairs that would soon set that all right ; and before Ann had time to ponder and wonder what this strange sort of medicine might be that could cure gratitude, rare indeed and but little in demand in this ungrateful world, Tom's knock and ring, very different from the modest muffin-bell, sent Ann flying to the door, where, I am sorry to say, the hero passed her even in that narrow, little passage, without noticing that it was not Mary Anne who held the door ; and it was only Will, coming behind more slowly, who saw the eager, little face and shy, bright eyes that followed Tom's *broad* shoulders into the house.

CHAPTER V.

A WORD TOO MUCH.

ANN's ambition to do something for Tom was gratified, but by no means satisfied during the next few days, though not in the way she had selected, that of cleaning his boots, for the time of his departure for Shanghai was coming very near, and in the sink of iniquity stood big trunks lined with tin, and on every chair and table and bed in the house were strewed, socks and shirts, vests and collars and handkerchiefs.

It was quite a pity, Ann thought, that they were nearly all of them new, and so afforded no scope for her mending talents ; but still they required marking, and this Ann undertook with rapture, entirely refusing any aid from marking-ink or indelible pencils, or any other invention of an indolent age, but working away with red marking-cotton in a way that would even have delighted the hearts of our grandmothers, and with such persistent application that Tom declared he could see T. G. in neat, little cross-stitch letters on those shy, deep blue eyes of hers, and would make her come and kneel down in front of him and look full into his cruel, laughing eyes, that he might observe the curious phenomenon.

He was very fond of teasing, was this hero of hers, as she very soon found out, and of course she was a

tempting subject for its exercise, as she would obey his slightest word or look, till even Mrs. Garnett, who had submitted to his teasing tyranny without a murmur since he first was capable of teasing and tyrannizing, which was at an unbelievably early age, urged Ann to rebellion.

“Don’t mind him, my dear. He does n’t mean it, it’s only his nasty, tiresome ways. It’s no use paying so much attention to his nonsense, or you will quite spoil him.” As if she had not done the same all her life.

Tom had plenty of leisure apparently just then for teasing, though he was generally supposed to be dreadfully busy with his preparations for leaving England, and on that account was excused attendance at his office, or only went for an hour or two in the day. He was certainly under the impression that he had a great deal to do, and that he did it, though I think that if all the time he spent leaning over the table, where his mother and Ann sat at work, and winding and unwinding the reel of marking-cotton, had been picked out of the day, the balance would have been very small. To be sure, he wore his hat most of the day, which is a sign, I have observed, of great press of work with some men, and shows, I conclude, that they cannot spare the time to remove it, which may also be the reason for charwomen wearing their bonnets so consistently. He also made out lists of his clothes, which nearly always led to the conclusion that most of his things had been lost or stolen, and made a general search through the house necessary, when the missing articles were usually found in

the very last spot you would have expected, their right places.

I expect that Tom kept up a good deal of the noise and rattle to prevent those tears that were so perilously near his mother's eyes from making their appearance, and to keep down the blues in himself, which were quite as much disposed to rise and color all his future prospects with a leaden hue. It was only when his mother and Ann had gone up to bed, and he and Will were smoking in the sink, that he threw off the pretence, and confessed that the next five years, which he painted to Ann in such golden colors, as one continual piece of fun, in the company of pigtails, pagodas, small feet and chop-sticks, in fact, life in a teacup without its proverbial storm, was after all only a very dreary five years' exile, just to be endured as well as was possible, with the eyes always fixed on the little speck of light shining, across the long years and many thousand miles, from that stronger light than ever science has discovered, the light of home.

Those evening smokes together were apt to get very silent, though they both felt that they had a great deal to say to one another, and not many more days to say it in. Mrs. Garnett, with all her grief at the parting, had not that keenest grief of realizing that, after the five years, it could not be the same Tom that came back. She knew that it was all Tom's nonsense when he told Ann that he should come back with his head shaved, and a pigtail and long finger-nails ; she was not so silly as to believe that rubbish, but she was quite as silly when she

thought of him coming back the very same as he was when he went.

But Tom and Will both felt down in their inmost hearts, unconfessed even to themselves that, though outward circumstances might stand absolutely still and unchanged, which was not likely, that same Will and Tom would never again sit together smoking, elbow to elbow, in that untidy, little room, with the same feeling of entire sympathy and perfect understanding of each other's moods and thoughts.

It was during one of these silent occasions, just a week after Ann had come to Paragon Terrace, that an unexpected interruption occurred. It was quite a warm night, and the window was open, and Will was sitting on the window-sill, half in, half out, and above his head, just showing over the tops of the houses behind, was a great, white moon which to Tom's fancy, as he watched it, had a distinctly Chinese expression of countenance.

"Will and I must talk business," Tom had said, as he kissed his mother good-night, but for the last half hour there had been very few words exchanged, and those scarcely of a business character, only Will pointing out the vagaries of a cat on the garden wall, and Tom taking an ineffectual shot at it with a bit of coal. So Ann need not have waited so long on the stairs, fancying that they were both deeply absorbed in important discussion, and not wishing to interrupt it with her own insignificant, little affairs.

She had been so happy that week, so happy! but from the very first she had known that it could not last. She had had it so firmly impressed upon her

at Miss Primmer's, what a charity it was to have her there, and feed and clothe her, and give her opportunities of learning, that she was not likely to underestimate the goodness of the Garnetts, or to think that such wonderful benevolence could be extended to her poor, little, worthless self for any length of time, and she had been trying to nerve herself to the terrible effort of going back to Miss Primmer's, and of begging to be taken back, and allowed to resume her duties.

Every day that passed seemed to make this harder to do, and she had wondered if there were any other schools in London where they might want a poor, little, ignorant girl to help with the little ones, and make herself generally useful. Several times she had begun the subject with Mrs. Garnett, but something had always happened to prevent her getting far with the matter, either Mrs. Garnett dropped off into a nap or Tom came in, or Toby mewed to be let out, or the butcher called for orders, until now a whole week had gone by, and Ann felt that it was high time something should be settled about her return to Laburnam Villa, and that the only thing to do was to take her courage in both hands and go down and speak to Tom himself about it, and so, after waiting for nearly half an hour on the stairs, to give time for more important talk between the brothers, she went down and knocked at the door of the sink, though it seemed to her that her heart beat so loud, that any one might have known she was there, without any further intimation.

“Come in,” said Tom.

And in she went, all eyes, as if she were going into a lion's den.

"Hullo!" said Tom in amazement, and Will swung himself into the room and flapped away the smoke with his handkerchief, to see who this little, white-faced, large-eyed apparition was, who had come on the scene.

"Is anything wrong with the Mater?" asked Tom. "No? That's right, then you've come to have a pipe with us. Will, can't you find her a chair?"

"You wanted to say something, did n't you?" said Will, clearing a heap of things off a box for her to sit down. He was nearer to her, and he could see how the color had rushed into her face, spreading even to the little, shell-like ears under the curly rings of hair, and how there was a little, bright drop glittering on the long eye-lashes, and he wished Tom would stop chaffing and hear what the poor, little thing had to say.

But Ann disregarded Will's encouraging words, and the seat he was preparing for her and went across to Tom, who gravely handed her a pipe and struck a fusee for her to light it.

"Please, don't laugh at me," she said, very quickly and breathlessly, "Mrs. Garnett said I might come, I wanted to thank you for all your kindness, and I think I ought to go back to Miss Primmer's to-morrow."

"Ought you, indeed?" said Tom. "May I ask why? Of course, I know that Miss Primmer is a most delightful person, and Laburnam Villa the *happiest home in the world*, but—"

“Don’t!” she interrupted him, “you know I was miserable there, and I don’t know however I shall bear it after knowing what it is to be so happy, as I have been this week—and you gone away—and Miss Primmer always dreadfully angry with me.” She ended with a sob.

“Then why should you go back?”

“Where else can I go?”

“Why not stay here? Have you got tired of us already? You won’t be bothered with me much longer, you know, and as for Will here, I’ve no doubt he’s poor company, but he’s really not so stupid as he looks.”

Will had gone back to his seat on the window-ledge, with the Chinese moon, looking over his head serenely at Ann. Tom had never told him exactly what his intentions were about Ann’s future, but Will had taken it for granted that she would stop on with them, and that Tom would arrange it all satisfactorily, somehow, and he took no part in the present discussion, only watching Ann’s plaintive, young face on which the moonlight fell, as if the calm celestial up above were also mildly interested in the matter, and were inclined to imitate Tom’s fatal act in the schoolroom at Laburnam Villa, and kiss the soft curve of the cheek and little, dimpled chin.

“How could I stay here?” Ann went on, “and be a burden to you? Oh, yes! Miss Primmer used to tell me every day what a burden I was, and how much I ate, and how I wore out everything, and was of no use, and how kind it was of her to keep

me. You must have noticed," she said, trying to steady her voice and to speak very reasonably, "what a dreadfully large appetite I have, but I can't help it, it's all so nice here, and I feel so hungry, and Mrs. Garnett always asks me to take things as if she really meant it, and not as if she expected me to say no, thank you!"

"Dear, dear!" said Tom, "what is to be done? it's really very alarming! I say, Will, it's a poor prospect for you, you'll have to look out or you'll get starved. I can't say that I have noticed the dangerous symptoms you mention, but I will be more observant in future."

"Don't laugh at me!" she sobbed, "please don't laugh at me! You don't know what it is to have to go away from a place where you've been so happy" ("don't I?" said Tom under his breath), "and to be so stupid as not to be able even to say 'thank you' properly."

She was sobbing so by this time that she could hardly get the words out, and she turned away with a little, dreary gesture, as if it was no good, and she must give up trying to say what she meant.

But before she reached the door, Tom's hands were on her poor, little, shaking shoulders, and he wheeled her round and stood looking down into the childish, tear-stained face.

"Why, my dear child," he said, "poor, little Ann, what are you making yourself miserable about? I would not let you go back to Miss Primmer's on any account whatever, and, if I agreed, I am sure my mother and Will would not hear of such a thing,

and even if we all consented to your going, Mary Anne would defy us, and make the house too hot to hold us without 'Miss Hann.' Now be a good, little girl, wipe up your eyes and forget all about Miss Primmer, and take care of the mother while I'm away, and make it cheerful for Will here, and keep them all alive and don't let them forget me. Find you a situation? Why, you silly, little goose! you must learn a lot before you can teach, and I'm going to settle with Will to find some school near here where they can put something into that empty, little head. There, run away to bed, and good-night."

It would have been well if he had stopped here, it would have saved many a heart-ache if those next careless words of his had remained unsaid, but, perhaps, looking down into Ann's face, it came across him what a sweet rose the bud might open into, and what fair gracious womanhood he might find in the place of that little slip of a girl when the five years were over; or, perhaps, it was his usual way of teasing Ann, and that he could not resist a joke, and so he added: "And when I come back from China with a gouty toe and a yellow face and liver-complaint, and you are an accomplished, young lady, I shall expect you to marry me, and make my gruel and bear my grumbling and let me hobble out leaning on your arm."

He ended with a laugh, and turned back to his chair and his pipe, but Will, from his perch in the window, saw a strange look come into the child's face, and thought to himself that Tom had gone a little bit too far.

CHAPTER VI.

TOM'S LAST SUNDAY.

SUNDAY was always a very pleasant day at Paragon Terrace, though, for the matter of that, if you had asked Ann, she would have said, that every day was very pleasant. Will and Tom always went to church with their mother, and sat one on each side of her, and found out the hymns for her, and saw that she had the right hassock, and pretended not to notice if she dropped off in the sermon.

It was difficult sometimes to get both of them down in time for church on Sunday morning, necessitating a succession of rappings at the door, and sleepy answers, beginning from Mary Anne's thud and " 'Ot water, Sir," at eight o'clock, and ending with Mrs. Garnett's indignant rattling of the handle at ten o'clock, and, " I don't believe you're out of bed, Will. Oh, it's no use pretending to answer so brisk, I can hear it's from under the bed-clothes, and I shall have to go to church by myself, I suppose ! "

But this sad necessity never actually happened, though it threatened on most Sundays, one or other always struggled down, buttoning his waistcoat or fastening a stud, in time to make a hasty breakfast, and start with Mrs. Garnett, while the other never failed to put in an appearance sooner or later in the

pew, meeting his mother's reproachful glance with looks of smiling contrition.

It was not a very interesting church, the school-children's nasal singing of "Lord Mornington" left a good deal to be desired, as did also the sermons, at least to critical people. I have also heard objections made to the drab color of the paint on the pews, and the white caps of the pew-openers, and to the raucous voice of the clerk, in the responses, which were his monopoly, or in the notices which he gave out with such grating distinctness: "That in the morning by the Vicar, that in the afternoon by the lecturer, and that in the evening by the Lord Bishop of the Diocese."

When Tom was very sea-sick on the Mediterranean, the screw seemed to be giving out those very same notices with all Mr. Radish's unctuous relish. But in spite of all this, there was a kind of tender sacredness about the place to both Tom and Will, that no other church could ever quite equal, even with a hundred greater advantages of beauty of architecture and ritual, music, and pure doctrine, set like pearls in golden eloquence, just as there is no place for a child's prayers like mother's knee, though the gown that covers it may be threadbare and shabby, and the hand resting on it not the fairest or softest, or even always the kindest.

For myself, I like in principle the separation of men and women in church, but I do not think, were I even the most ascetic and correct-looking sacristan in a long cassock with unlimited buttons, I could have found it in my heart to separate Mrs. Garnett

from Tom and Will, and march her off solitary to a creaking chair, between two unsympathizing females.

That last Sunday of Tom's there was, of course, an additional feeling of tenderness and kindly toleration towards all the well-remembered, little, dull details of the ritual, things that had often enough given rise to irritable comment in Tom and Will, but which now seemed like the small peculiarities of an old and valued friend, utterly insignificant, as compared to his sterling good qualities, or even rather pleasing, as being part of himself, without which we should hardly recognize him.

It was a very tearful occasion for Mrs. Garnett, and as ill luck would have it on this, of all Sundays, she had forgotten her pocket-handkerchief, and after a breathless rummage in her pocket, with a tear running down each side of her nose, was quite at her wit's end what to do, when Will came to the rescue, and passed his large silk handkerchief, which was very consoling, but would have looked better if it had not been orange-colored.

On Sunday afternoons, if the weather permitted, Tom and Will always took Mrs. Garnett for a walk, sometimes even getting as far as Kensington Gardens, though, after all, Regent's Park on a sunny afternoon is as pretty and pleasant a walk as any one need wish for, and not so far from Paragon Terrace. But these walks were in no way to interfere with Mary Anne's afternoon out, and though Mrs. Garnett protested regularly every Sunday that *it was not safe*, and expected every time they re-

turned home to find the silver teapot and spoons had disappeared during their absence; the house was left to Toby's care, who fully justified the confidence placed in him.

The first Sunday Ann was there, she went with them, and her innocent delight in the flower beds just coming into their glory of scarlet and blue, yellow and purple, as the bedding plants came into flower, and her rapture at the scents of mignonette and stocks from the window-boxes of the terraces, made them all open their eyes and draw in their breath with the same vivid pleasure as she did, and recognize that there is beauty and sweetness to be found even in smoky London on a bright June day, which we miss by poking along with heads down, and eyes half shut, only smelling the odors from the gutter, and seeing the dust on our eye-lashes.

But on the second Sunday she said she would rather stop at home, no doubt from the same motive that had made her in the morning push quite rudely, as Miss Primmer would have said, past Mrs. Garnett as they went into church, and take up her place in an empty pew where Will had sat the Sunday before, as there was not room in the little pew for more than three, and by this means left it free for the mother and the two sons to sit together for the last time. They all appreciated the motive, and knew also that was why she chose to stay at home that afternoon, though the sun was shining, and the canary at number eight singing as if it would burst that yellow throat of his, if not the ears of his hearers.

So Mrs. Garnett and Tom and Will went out together, leaving Ann sitting in the low chair by the window, and here Will found her half an hour later when he came back before the other two. Two is company and three is none, they say, but I do not think this generally applies to mother and sons, but certainly that Sunday afternoon Will felt as if he were rather in the way, there never seemed quite room for them to walk abreast, and he fancied, quite unnecessarily, that he was a constraint on the conversation, and that perhaps they had things to say to one another that would be easier to say if he were not there; so he discovered that he was a little bit tired, and said he would go home and see what Ann was about, and that was why he came back so soon to interrupt Ann's day-dreams.

He could scarcely, however, be said to interrupt them, for when he came into the room, having opened the front door with a latch-key, Ann only turned her face for a moment to him with a smile and then let her head sink back into its former position of rest, and her eyes wander again out of the window, where they surely must have seen something more interesting than the houses opposite, or the lamp-post, or the young man craning over the area railings to converse with some rather shrill-voiced fair one in the kitchen at number twenty.

What was she thinking of? Will wondered as he sat at the table writing a letter. One thing was very plain, it was certainly not of him, for she seemed barely conscious of his presence, and took no more

notice of his movements than she did of Toby's, indeed, hardly so much, for Toby's claimative mew led her to unclasp the hands that lay on her lap, and stretch out one to stroke the stout, tabby body that was rubbing against her skirts. It was not very flattering to be ignored even more entirely than the cat, but Will could not return the compliment, and ignore her, or even pay much attention to his letter, for he could not help looking across at the slight, girlish figure, in its shabby, black frock, and the curly head resting back in the corner of the high-backed arm-chair, and the blue eyes (how wonderfully blue they were when those black lashes did not shade them!) looking away into fairy-land, or the future, or heaven, it must be something beautiful to put such a look in them as that.

His curiosity was so aroused after a time that he wheeled his chair round towards her and asked, "Sister Ann, sister Ann, do you see anything coming?"

I do not suppose that Ann had ever read the story of Bluebeard, children's tales had never come much in her way, and so she answered the question literally, coming back with a start from her real subject of contemplation: "No, but there's a hansom just gone round the corner."

Then seeing the smile in his eyes, she guessed what he meant, and seeing something encouraging and sympathetic there along with the smile, she spoke out suddenly, "Brother Will, did he mean what he said the other night?"

"Who? little sister Ann, Tom?"

"Yes, he's so often in fun that sometimes I think it was only a joke."

"What about? about your stopping here, and being my little sister, and the mother's little daughter?"

Ann nodded almost impatiently: "Oh, yes! I know he meant that. It was what he said afterwards. Do you really think that if I try very hard and learn everything I possibly can and take the greatest pains and get to be very, very good, and ladylike, and clever, I could ever be good enough to be his wife?" Her voice sank nearly to a whisper, as if it were almost too great presumption to utter the word aloud, and then she went on quickly as if to stop the discouraging word which Will might think it right to speak. "Oh, I know I'm not fit for him yet! I'm too young and much too ignorant, but I can learn a great deal in five years, five years is such a long time, you see, if I try every moment of the time, and you will help me, won't you? and tell just what he likes, and just how he would wish—his wife—to be."

Will was considerably puzzled how to answer her; she had laid one little, slender hand, which still bore the traces of the hard work at Laburnam Villa, on his sleeve, and was looking up at him with such earnest, appealing eyes. He was sure she had taken Tom's careless words much too seriously, and yet many a true word is spoken in earnest, and perhaps Tom really felt something deeper than the teasing, brotherly, or fatherly liking he manifested outwardly for this little girl.

Ann's anxious eyes, searching his face, seemed able to read some of his thoughts, and clouded, and her lip trembled.

"He did not really mean it?" she said, "he was only in joke?"

But Will could not bear to see the change in her bright, eager face, and, moreover, he felt sure now that Tom must have meant what he said, he could not have helped it and so he hastened to reassure her; "But, sister Ann," he added, "five years is, as you say, a long time, and suppose when Tom comes back you do not care for him or have seen some one you like better?"

She snatched away her hand from his arm, where it had rested, as she spoke with almost an angry gesture.

"I'm not so bad as you think me," she said, with her eyes flashing with indignant tears. "I'm not so horrid and ungrateful, and false! It's not five years nor fifty that would make me forget all I owe to him, and if I should live to be a hundred I could never like any one else half as well. But you don't understand—and I'd better go and get the tea." And Ann went off to shed a few hot, angry tears in the pantry.

But she was not one to bear malice, and Will looked so penitent when she brought up the tray, that she could not help smiling at him, upon which they shook hands and made it up, and he came down to help make the kettle boil, and they grew greater friends than ever, sitting on the kitchen fender together making the toast, till Ann's right cheek, and

Will's left were scorched a fiery red, while Will racked his brains to think of any little peculiarities and tastes of Tom's.

They had been together pretty well all their lives, he and Tom, and yet it was quite surprising how ignorant he was of Tom's preferences in small matters; Will certainly must have been very unobservant, for even Ann, in little more than a week, knew more than he did in such matters, as to whether Tom liked hard roe or soft in bloaters, crust or crumb, miller or baker, and indeed, in this last matter, Will was obliged to be told that "miller" was the under part of the loaf and "baker" the upper, and that with most people, it was not a matter of indifference which they took.

"And do you think," said Ann cautiously, making the matter a wide, general question, instead of giving it a closer and more particular application, not having quite forgiven Will, "do you think it is better for husbands and wives to like the same things or different? Of course, if one likes soft roe and the other hard, they can each have what they like best, but it makes it rather dull never to give up to the other, does n't it?"

"Yes," said Will, "I always thought the Jack Spratts a most uninteresting couple."

But Ann did not know the people referred to, and when Will repeated the couplet—

"Jack Spratt could eat no fat,
His wife could eat no lean,
And so between them both, you see,
They licked the platter clean."

she thought them worse than uninteresting, especially Mrs. Spratt, whose taste appeared to her coarse to a degree.

Will also had never observed whether Tom placed his right thumb uppermost or his left, when he clasped his hands, and Ann was able to inform him and also tell him the deep significance of the habit: as the right thumb uppermost shows that the possessor rules, and the left thumb uppermost shows that he is ruled.

Of course Will first of all maintained that it was a matter of perfect indifference, and that sometimes he did one thing and sometimes another; but, after one or two attempts, he found that it was only by applying his mind to the subject that he could bring his right thumb to the fore, and that when he did it carelessly without thinking, his left reigned supreme, so that he must needs resign himself to belong to the ranks of the ruled.

“And which does Tom do?”

“Why, of course his right is uppermost,” Ann said indignantly, as if it were an insult to suppose that her hero could do other than rule.

“And which do you do?”

The fire was certainly very scorching, but at this question, the heat seemed to affect her left cheek as well as her right, while she slowly folded her hands, leaving the little left thumb, smudged with black from the toasting-fork, on the top.

“Ann,” said Will severely, “you’re cheating, you don’t do that naturally.”

“Well,” she answered, blushing and laughing,

“don’t you see two people can’t rule at the same time?”

“So you thought that in five years you might learn to tuck that poor, little right thumb in? Well, you need n’t begin just yet, for you ’ll have to rule me, you see, till Tom comes home.”

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD-BYE.

“MOTHER,” Tom said.

It was the very last afternoon that he would be at home; the time was so short now that you could easily count it by minutes, even if you were not any stronger at arithmetic than Ann, to whom most of the rules were terrible mysteries, partaking of the nature of conjuring tricks.

It was as much as Tom could do to prevent his mother from relapsing into tearful last words.

Reader, do you know how awkward it is when you are seeing a friend off by the train and get through your leave-takings too soon? You have said “Good-bye,” and “Well, I’m very glad to have seen you,” and “Write soon,” and “Give my love to John and Mary Anne,” and “Remember me to your aunt,” and yet the train does not start, and it seems unfriendly to hurry away, and you stand craning your neck, and nodding and smiling till your cheeks ache, and you know that the girl in the next carriage thinks you are making a fool of yourself. And then you say, “You’ve got your ticket all right?” when you know she has, and, “Your luggage is put in behind,” which it generally is, and, “You’ll not have to change anywhere,” which the guard has just told her; and then you go on despe-

rately, "I hope you won't catch cold," — why should she? and "Don't forget that your umbrella is in the net." She is not an idiot if you are. And then you pretend to see something very interesting further along the platform, and you go a few steps and come back quite brisk. "They're putting a horse-box on behind," as if she cared what they were doing! and then (oh, blessed sound!), "Ah, there's the whistle!" as if she were deaf. "Now you're off!" as if the whistle was usually the signal to stop. "Good-bye. *Good-bye.*"

But to return to Tom. He had been fighting off any gloomy subjects all day, and now, as tea-time approached, and Will was to be expected every minute, Tom seemed to have come to an end of all his chatter and nonsense, and an ominous silence fell on the three sitting in the little room, and Mrs. Garnett sighed twice very heavily and began feeling for her pocket-handkerchief, which was already reduced to a small, damp knob. There was nothing to do either; for those large trunks were not only packed, but soldered up and corded, and had Tom's name painted on them in large white letters, and Ann was mending a sock for Will just to fill up the time, in a half-hearted, listless sort of way, with an undefined feeling that she had five years to do it in.

But after that second sigh of Mrs. Garnett's, Tom felt that this would not do at any price, so he began very cheerfully, "Mother, do you know that when I come back Ann is to marry me? So I particularly *request* that you will pay the greatest attention to

her education, as, after the society of Chinese ladies, I shall, no doubt, be very particular."

Tom had not said anything more until now of those jesting words of his, that had taken such hold on Ann's imagination ; neither had Will repeated to him any of his conversation with Ann on Sunday afternoon. Will had debated within himself a good deal, as to whether he had better do so, but had ultimately determined to leave it alone. When Ann's hand was no longer on his arm, nor her eyes looking so earnestly up into his, he could not feel so decidedly that Tom had meant seriously what he said that night, it sounded very like a joke, as far as he could remember ; and afterwards, when Ann had gone up to bed, Tom made no further reference to it, but had gravely discussed the best arrangements for her education, and the amount he would pay quarterly for her board and clothes, all in a very business-like, matter-of-fact way, as if she were merely a child who had no choice in any matter and need not be consulted.

So Will said nothing, hoping that time and absence might calm down the child's gratitude to a less fiery feeling, or that some unpremeditated word or joke from Tom might gently snuff out the little spark that his words had lighted in her heart, without causing much of a pang to the tender, little soul.

But this afternoon something brought the subject back to Tom's memory, perhaps because he had exhausted every other subject of teasing, and felt that those last few hours were too dangerously sad for

even five minutes' silence, or ordinary serious conversation, to be safe.

"My dear Tom! the idea! Why you might as soon talk of marrying Toby! How can you put such notions into the child's head?"

But he had certainly managed to put a notion into his mother's head, for before she had reached the end of the sentence, that active mind of hers had evolved half-a-dozen plans out of the idea, including Ann's wedding dress and the possibility of their being able to get number seven in the Terrace, as their residence, as she had heard that it was likely to be let before long, and she had gone on to wonder whether Tom would wish to have the silver teapot, which it would cause her rather a pang to relinquish, even to Tom's wife, as none other made tea so entirely to her liking.

These considerations quite distracted her mind from Tom's harangue on all the virtues and graces that he expected in his wife, and which his mother would have to instil into Ann to make her suitable for that distinguished position; but if she did not listen, Ann did with those little, burning ears of hers, though she pretended to be darning away so industriously at that sock of Will's. . .

Tom out of the corner of his eye could see the effects his words produced on his poor, little listener who, more than once, unconscious that he could see her movements, got up to steal a hasty glance in the glass over the fireplace at her horrified, little face, which was so entirely unlike all that Tom seemed to expect to find at the end of the

five years, and which he considered essential in his wife.

“Toby?” said Tom, in answer to his mother’s last remark; “no, I am not particular, but I should object to a tabby wife, not to mention that I have always been led to believe Toby to be a gentleman. Too young? not a bit of it! Why, how old are you, Ann? Fifteen, next birthday? Well, add five to that and when you have divided and multiplied and cast out the nines and all the rest of it, I think you will make twenty. Now, mother, I have often heard you solemnly declare that you were not twenty-one when you married, so I don’t see that there will be anything to object to in the matter of age, if everything else answers to the requirements. I should wish my wife to be tall, *very* tall,” went on Tom, as Ann drew up her slight figure to the greatest height it could reach, which was by no means gigantic. “Some men think that a wife need not reach above her husband’s heart, but you see, mother, not being tall myself, my wife would have to be a dwarf according to that standard. No, I think I require some one I can look up to and respect, a head or (shall we say?) half a head taller than myself and stout in proportion. I am told, Ann,” he said, turning to the poor, little darner, “that growth is promoted by hanging to the top of the door for an hour or two, night and morning, but I have never tried it myself. I think I should like my wife to be fair. Oh, yes! a broad, fair, smiling face with a good deal of cheek. Now, Ann, don’t misunderstand my words, and put a vulgar con-

struction on them ; of course I mean cheeks in the plural. Her hair," Tom went on, letting his eyes pass over Ann's curly, little, dark head, " must be fair and as smooth as satin, never a hair out of place."

It was in vain that Ann patted and smoothed the curls and ripples that asserted themselves so obstinately and tried to push away the little rings that encroached so softly on her temples, she could as soon have made her hair fair as smooth.

Will had come in just before this and, as tea was not quite ready, had sat down, scarcely noticed as usual by Ann, to look over the evening paper he had bought on his way up, smiling now and again at the picture of the ponderous and elephantine female that Tom was describing as his preference, and the utter hopelessness of little Ann ever coming near to it in any one particular.

" I should wish my wife, mother, to be thoroughly well educated, to be, in fact, what is called a superior woman, with a strong opinion on woman's rights and the suffrage. She must understand the money article and the stock market. Now, Ann, I have no doubt you think the stock market is a place where flowers are to be bought, but Mrs. Tom Garnett will know that it is quite the contrary, in fact that it is more in the Zoological line, with bulls and bears. She will be able to converse on Shakespeare and the musical glasses — Now, Ann, I 'm afraid you don't know what the musical glasses are?"

Ann shook her head despondently.

"Nor do I; but Mrs. Tom Garnett will be able to inform me. She will speak several languages fluently, including North American Indian and gibberish, and sing and play the violoncello, and the barrel organ, and dance the Boston and the sword-dance, and swim, and ride on horseback and paint (I don't mean her cheeks) and make butter and sheep's-eyes, and play chess and old Harry, and work the sewing machine and the mischief."

Tom was quite out of breath with the long list of his future wife's accomplishments, going so quickly that Ann had not time to weed out the nonsense, and only listened aghast to such a catalogue of acquirements, that even those long five years hardly seemed to allow time for a hundredth part being crowded into an empty, little head.

"How will you wish her to dress?" asked Will.

"Beautifully; in large patterns and bright colors, because, of course, being so big, she will have to take a broad view of the subject, and can carry off a massive style. And—oh, by the way, Ann, you must try and cultivate a long nose, as, after five years among the Chinese, I shall thirst for the sight of a profile! I think she will wear a fringe like that Miss — what was her name, Ann, at Miss Primmer's, I mean the one with a face like a Kalmuck Tartar?"

Now Ann did not know at all what a Kalmuck Tartar might be like, nor, indeed, had Tom a much clearer idea; but she suggested Miss Jones as the one with the most aggressive fringe.

"To be sure! Jones was the name, and the

effect is deeply impressed on my memory. You know, Will, the particularly intellectual and civilized effect it gives to the human face to have a straight and rather greasy plaster of hair coming down to the eyebrows? If anything would make me believe in Darwin's theory about our ancestors, it would be a prolonged contemplation of Miss Jones, only in her case it could not have been many generations since grandpapa, the Barbary ape — Why, Ann, what on earth are you doing?"

Tom had jumped up in a hurry and was holding both Ann's little hands, with Mrs. Garnett's large scissors grasped in one of them, tightly in his, while a curly lock of dark hair touched at the edge with gold fell right on that evening paper, which Will was scanning with such divided interest, and covered the money article that the future Mrs. Tom Garnett was to understand so perfectly, while Ann turned up to Tom a little flushed, excited face, with a look of deadly determination in the blue eyes, and with her hair in front cut short on one temple.

"Oh, Ann, you silly, ridiculous, little girl! How could you be such a goose? Why, what an object you've made of yourself! A regular little pig with one ear," Tom went on, smoothing back the hair from her forehead with his hands, and turning her face round to the light by the chin, with as little ceremony as if she had been a baby. "I tell you what it is, Ann, you won't be fit to be any one's wife till you get a little more sense in your head and learn to understand a joke. Hullo, here's tea, *I must wash my hands.*"

And off he went, leaving the poor, little pig with one ear gazing at her shorn, one-sided appearance in the glass, with rather a woe-begone, young face, and trying vainly to conceal the ravages made by the scissors.

As for that lock of hair, it must have got swept away into the grate when the table was cleared for tea, for when Ann looked about for it to hide the vestiges of her silly, impetuous act, it was nowhere to be seen.

Tom was to leave early next morning, and he tried hard to persuade his mother to let him say good-bye the night before, and slip off quietly with Will next morning, without disturbing any one ; but, of course, she would not hear of this, and it was only after long persuasion that she agreed not to get up, if Ann would see to the breakfast and Tom come up the last thing to say good-bye, and she kept waking every five minutes all through the night and striking a light to see if it were not time for Ann to go and call Mary Anne. She might, however, have saved herself that trouble, for the six o'clock breakfast sat too heavily on Mary Anne's mind to allow of her going to bed at all, and she spent the night with Toby, nodding over the kitchen fire, with her feet up on a chair as a precaution against "beedles."

There is always, take what pains you may, such a discomfort about meals taken just before starting on a journey. There is really no hurry, and yet people have a way of drinking their coffee standing up, and sitting sideways on their chairs ; there is no immediate necessity for great coats being brought

into the room on these occasions more than others, and yet they nearly always make their appearance to encumber the chairs, and hats assert themselves on the sideboard, and Gladstone bags turn up at unexpected spots, and try and trip their owners up.

Tom and Will were both of them very silent, and, if Tom had not been going away for five years, one might have said cross, and Ann was trying her very utmost to keep down the lump in her throat, and to blink the pricking tears out of her eyes, and to pour out the coffee properly, and to see that Tom had everything he could possibly want close at hand.

The cab had been ordered the night before, but, of course, for a few minutes there was the usual doubt as to whether it would come, which is a trial to the most composed and well-regulated mind; but at last the patient, gray horse made its appearance, standing with its knees a little bent, and its head drooping resignedly, as if it were all the same how many heavy boxes were hoisted up on to the top of the cab, with all that rattling of chains and thumping.

Will was superintending the moving of the luggage, while Tom dashed up to his mother's room for that bitter five minutes that could no longer be delayed. It was raining, Ann noticed now for the first time, a sweet, soft June rain that smelt even fresh and fragrant on the London pavements, and that must have been sweet as nectar itself in the country, on the thymy uplands, or the great stretches of glowing crimson clover. The cabman was putting on a shiny, very much cracked, water-

proof cape, and Will touched Ann's arm as she stood on the door-step unconscious of the drops falling on her head.

"Little sister Ann," he said, "you will get wet."

But she hardly noticed his words, for Tom was coming. He came with a great bustle, and a calling to Mary Anne in rather husky tones for his overcoat, and to Will to know if his bag had been put in; there is nothing like a little fuss and hurry for keeping down sentiment when it threatens to become unmanageable.

There was plenty of time, but whether it was owing to the appearance of the horse, who certainly did not look capable of great speed, or to the sound of his mother's door opening, I do not know, but Tom was seized with a sudden panic that he should lose the train, and he bolted into the cab followed by Will, and shouted, "Charing Cross," to the driver, and the gray horse wagged its tail and resignedly got under way, and the cab, swaying top heavy with the big boxes, lumbered off and round the corner out of sight of Paragon Terrace, and of the little girl standing there with the rain falling on her bare head, and her eyes dim with the tears that could no longer be repressed.

"Why, Tom," Will said, "you never said good-bye to little Ann!"

"No more I did!" said Tom.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITHOUT TOM.

How long those five years seemed likely to be, if all the days were as long as this first day, Ann thought again and again, not reckoning, of course, that this had begun two hours sooner than most days. She felt bitterly ashamed of herself for getting very hungry about nine o'clock. I do not suppose that she really thought she could subsist on the thought of Tom alone during the five years of his absence, but at any rate she felt that the first day it was unfeeling to a degree to enjoy so thoroughly the plate of bread and butter which Mary Anne, understanding better the weakness of human nature, brought up in the middle of the morning.

“ There now, you just eat it up, Miss Hann, as is quite your juty to keep up for the sake of Missus and Mr. Will, and there ain’t nothing like crying for giving any one a happetite, as I’ve heard my mother say oftens the time, as folks eat double as much at a burying as any other time. And if you’ve ever a-noticed, Miss Hann, how terrible sharp-set one feels of a Sunday, I’m fit pretty near to eat my prayer-book sometimes, before the sermon’s half done, and you ain’t had next to no breakfast — and oh, Miss Hann, do you think it’s true as Mr. Tom won’t have nothing but bird’s nesties and puppy dog to eat till *he come back again?* ”

There was certainly something very like Sunday about that day, and Ann felt as if it was rather profane to get out her needlework, or to look at the newspaper, and this feeling was strengthened when Mrs. Garnett came down in her Sunday dress, with a clean pocket-handkerchief and a Bible in her hand. But after that bread and butter, the sound of a band coming along the road awoke a most shamefully cheerful feeling down in some corner of Ann's heart; she tried hard not to listen to it, or to drown it with a sigh, and to think of Tom, and to wonder where he had got to and what he was thinking about, but it would not do, and, in spite of herself, her foot began tapping in time to that inspiriting march, and when she heard Mary Anne's voice from the area calling—“Miss Hann, Miss Hann, they're a coming up the road,” she jumped up and ran to the window as if the five years were over, and Tom himself might be marching home. It was not till the last strain had died away, and no amount of craning out of window would allow of a glimpse of stout scarlet pincushion backs, that she turned round deeply ashamed of her heartless behavior and found, to her great relief, that Mrs. Garnett was close behind her, every whit as anxious to see the soldiers and tapping her foot on the ground to the enlivening rub-a-dub of the drum, still echoing in her ears, as if she could have marched with the best of them.

Ah, reader! don't you think that the very frivolity and inconstancy of these poor hearts of ours, that we blame so severely in ourselves and others, are after all qualities to be thankful for, if not exactly to be

proud of? Don't you think that it may be a merciful intention, and not mere human weakness, that attracts our eyes to the daisies round the grave, where what we love best is being laid, or even to the folds of crape upon our dress, or the red nose of the undertaker's man?

If poor, little Ann could have spent those five years as she honestly intended, and fully expected, in tears and memories of Tom, what a wretched, tear-sodden, little object she would have been on his return, even if she had lived to tell the tale, and what good would it have done to any one under the sun?

So she need not have felt such pangs of remorse at the interest and even amusement into which she was continually being betrayed, even that very first day, though she really could not lay claim to the self-restraint and unselfishness that Will attributed to her when he came in rather earlier than usual that afternoon and found the room devoted to millinery, and Ann, with bright eyes and pins in her mouth, concocting a new cap for Mrs. Garnett, whose interest was entirely absorbed in the manœuvres of Ann's quick, little fingers, which were plaiting and gathering and frilling in a manner marvellous to behold.

It was quite impossible to Will, who had carried with him all day long the memory of the tragic, little face in the rain on the door-step, to imagine that she really could be interested even to the pitch of excitement over the exact position of a bow of ribbon, or an end of lace, and he set it all down

to disinterested efforts to distract and amuse his mother.

He had felt very gloomy himself at intervals, all day, after seeing Tom off at Charing Cross, but of course he had his work to do and strangers to rub up against, and all the usual round of life that was entirely unconnected with Tom, and he found himself laughing as heartily at some joke and entering as warmly into some dispute among the bank officials, as if he should go home by and by and repeat the joke to Tom and enlist his sympathy on his side in the disputed question. But it was different, he told himself, with women, and he would hardly have been surprised, when he reached home, to have found Ann still standing on the door-step, gazing after her departed hero, who was, by this time, well on his way across France to Brindisi.

So he was greatly relieved to hear cheerful voices, one of them rendered rather indistinct from pins in the mouth, issuing from the open window, and to find his mother and Ann deep in the mysteries of millinery; and, as I have said, he set it all down to Ann's noble self-control and blessed the day when Miss Primmer's wrath was the means of sending such a consoling, little sister to Paragon Terrace.

There is no doubt that Ann was a great help to both of them, in those first days of Tom's absence, though it was not by helping them to forget him and think of something else, for she talked perpetually of him morning, noon, and night, and every subject that came under discussion, however widely

removed, always in some mysterious way worked round to Tom.

She sang his praises so lustily and with such an utter want of discrimination, or real knowledge of his character, that even his mother sometimes ventured to demur, while as for Will, he and Ann often came to the verge of quarrelling, because he would not ascribe to Tom namby-pamby virtues and hairdresser's-young-man graces, which he certainly did not possess, and was better in Will's opinion without.

You see, Ann's acquaintance with Tom was barely more than a fortnight old, for those brief episodes at the Latin classes at Laburnam Villa were hardly sufficient to allow of much observation of character, neither had Ann much experience of human nature, least of all, male human nature, so as to compare Tom with others, but having firmly made up her mind that he possessed every virtue under the sun, she painted his memory with all the most incongruous qualities, quite unaware what a remarkably unpleasant monster she was producing, with no proportion or correspondence in the various parts.

Even on such points as his height and size of his feet and hands, she would have been as positive as on his mental qualities, as she could not bear to allow that in any one point Will had the advantage; but Mrs. Garnett could not be convinced that Tom was the tallest and showed triumphantly, in support of her argument, the pencil-marks on the door, which she had made with her very own hands,

to mark their height, where Will's was at least three inches above Tom's, and even so she was not sure that Tom did not stand on his toes.

As to his feet, Mary Anne's was conclusive evidence, having cleaned their boots every morning, for the last three years, she could have told them apart with her eyes shut; but for his hands Ann remained unconvinced, for though Mrs. Garnett brought out one of the first gloves he had ever worn, a little, yellow thread glove sadly stained with blackberry juice, and also produced pencil-tracings of a small object like a star with a queer little, fat, turned-back thumb, labelled "Baby's hand, aged four months," and another "aged ten months," these though deeply interesting could not be counted as evidence, either one way or the other, and that old pair of gloves that Mary Anne produced, were worn out of all shape and size from being used for black-leading purposes.

Ann was to have Tom's bedroom while he was away, and she entered on her possession of it with a sort of awe. She would not have it altered in any one particular, even the old shaving-brush should be left in the table drawer and the pipe and two shirt-studs on the mantel-piece, so that when he came back he should find it just the same as he had left it. Will gave her a photograph of Tom, framed to hang over the bed in the place of the one of Mrs. Garnett, which Tom had carried off with him, a gift which Ann received most ungraciously at first, as she considered the portrait a shameful caricature, and then, after poring over it for a whole afternoon, suddenly

became convinced of its excellence and was prepared to defy the world to prove that the somewhat stiff and staring representation of Tom's face was not a triumph of the photographic art.

Every night before she got into bed she used to wish that portrait of Tom "good-night," after she had said her prayers, where his name stood first of all to be commended to the special protection of the Blessed Virgin and the saints; for Ann's prayers were strangely mixed up with the memories of her childhood in the "ould counthree," where, whatever her father's faith may have been, if he had any, Biddy O'Brien, her foster mother, and Eileen and Nora, were "good Catholics," and taught the child to lisp the Paternoster and tell her beads and call on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to bless the bed that she lay on.

But when Ann came to Miss Primmer's she found that nothing of the sort could be allowed in that well-regulated and thoroughly Protestant establishment. Miss Primmer gave a terrible lecture to the frightened, little maiden on the errors of Rome, and bound her over to keep it a profound secret that she knew anything about those wicked, ignorant Papists, who are always trying to blow up the Queen and Parliament and to upset the church and throne; for if such a thing got about among the pupils at Laburnam Villa, their parents would remove them instantly, and quite right too, Miss Primmer said, with that strict impartiality on which she prided herself and which would acknowledge justice even in an act which brought ruin on herself; for what conscien-

tious parents would allow their daughter to associate for a moment with one who might be a Jesuit in disguise? And so (you perceive the moral, reader?) Ann must keep her popery entirely out of sight, that these conscientious parents should not have their fears aroused by the knowledge of the perils their dear girls were exposed to at Laburnam Villa, from the contact with this little wolf in sheep's clothing.

In after days, when the catastrophe described in the earlier chapters happened, Miss Primmer was able to a certain extent to account for Ann's atrocious behavior, from the fact of her being a Papist.

But Ann was deeply impressed with the feeling that all she knew of prayer and faith were things very much to be ashamed of, though Miss Primmer's harangue had made no other impression on her mind, and were certainly very wicked and perhaps also vulgar, like Punch and Judy. She could not remember any wish in Nora or Eileen or in Tim or Thady, or any of the boys, to blow up the Queen or to upset anything; they seemed well-enough content, if they had sufficient "praties," without too much trouble, and a wake or a wedding now and then, with plenty of jiggling and fun; but of course, Miss Primmer knew best.

So even when she came to Paragon Terrace, and found the same laws of the Medes and Persians were not in force there, and that opinions varied pretty widely from some of Miss Primmer's, she still kept her secret to herself, and it was only quite accidentally one day that Will found it out.

"I wonder what your mother was like, Ann," he

said. He had undertaken to give her lessons in French and arithmetic in the evening, and he had been watching her as she sat over her slate on which a long-division sum was growing more and more indistinct, from repeated rubbings out, and more and more wrong every time he glanced over to see how she got on, and Ann's brow grew every moment more knit till it hardly seemed as if it would ever come smooth again, and her mouth screwed up into all sorts of queer, little shapes of perplexity and despair.

"I wonder what your mother was like, or if you ever had one, or just growed like Topsy."

Will did not generally encourage conversation over the sums, he was obliged to be very strict in keeping to the subject in hand, as his mother had a way of introducing all sorts of irrelevant matters that were apt to carry them miles away from the slate, but it was quite his own fault this time, and Ann laid down her pencil and slate with a sigh of relief at such a chance of escape from severe application to study.

"My mother died," she said, "when I was a baby. They say she was very pretty."

Will shook his head doubtfully, with something of Tom's teasing spirit. "Ah, then, I suppose you took after your father?"

"Yes," she said simply; "they always said I was more like him. I can remember him quite well, though he only came now and then to see me. He lived in Dublin, and he said when I was grown up, I should come and live with him, but he died, and I was sent to Miss Primmer's."

“Who sent you?”

“Mr. Milligan.”

“Who’s Mr. Milligan?”

Ann shook her head. “He was a friend of father’s, at least he said he had lent father lots and lots of money and never been paid, and Eileen and Mrs. O’Brien said it was very good of him to send me to England, where I should learn as a lady should, but they didn’t want me to go all the same, and they cried, and they cried when I came away, and so did I, and it’s many’s the time I’ve thought I’d just run home to them again, but it’s such miles away, and I had no money, and there’s that dreadful sea in between!” and Ann shuddered at the memory of the sea-sickness and wretchedness of the journey.

“Did Mr. Milligan write to Miss Primmer?”

“Once or twice, and then he left off, and she was very angry, and she wrote ever so many times and, at last, her letters came back again, and they said he had gone away.”

Another shudder as if that time had its memories as black as the voyage in the steamer.

“I should like to find out,” Will said thoughtfully, “if there is any one belonging to you, uncles, or cousins, or aunts.”

Now I feel it my duty to assure the reader here, once for all, that little Ann Nugent was not the heir of any noble family; there is no duke or earl lurking in the background, to come forward at a propitious moment to claim her as his long-lost daughter. She has no handkerchief embroidered with a coronet, no locket with a mysterious inscription to prove her

claims to a great inheritance or noble birth. I am sorry for the reader's natural disappointment, and I feel that this should have been the *dénouement*, as in all well-conducted narratives, but stern fact obliges me to confess that Ann's parentage was shrouded in obscurity, and seems likely to remain so; and for my part I like her none the less because she has not a gallery of ugly, ill-conditioned ancestors to frown and leer and goggle at her from the walls.

Years after, Ann and one who loved her very dearly went honeymooning in Ireland, yes, actually braved the terrors of the passage and the sea-sickness, and found out little Drumbeg, with its cluster of tumble-down shanties, from which the blue peat smoke curled up to the bluer sky, and troops of merry, rough-headed, barefooted children, and lean, friendly pigs played on perfect equality in the rutty road, and in and out of the untidy potato patches. They found Nora married, with half-a-dozen dirty, funny, little brats, and sweet Eileen's grave in the sunny graveyard, whither a rabble of children and pigs accompanied them to show the spot. They found also kindly Biddy O'Brien, stouter and fonder of a "drap of the crathur" than in the old days, but as ready as ever to give a hearty welcome and share whatever she had with a friend; but neither she nor Nora could throw any further light on Ann's family history, and after all, what did it matter?

But to come back to that evening in Paragon Terrace, and the slate, for it was then that Will found out that Ann had been brought up a Roman Catholic. In her description of her life at Drumbeg the

name of Father Flynn escaped more than once, and presently Will said, half in joke, "Why, Ann, I expect you are a little Papist," and was surprised to see the crimson flood that rushed into the girl's face, and at her energetic, vehement denial.

After that Ann became suddenly silent and studious, and went back to that much-smeared sum with apparent determination to get it right, but Will could see that she was writing and rubbing out figures at hap-hazard, and guessed that her mind was full of something else than long division.

"Will," she said at last very low, though she might have spoken out without rousing Mrs. Garnett from the peaceful nap into which she had sunk, "do you think that Father Flynn and Eileen and Mrs. O'Brien were Papists?"

"I expect they were, little Ann."

"But they were good and kind, and spoke the truth, and loved me," pleaded Ann, with tears brimming in her eyes; "and Miss Primmer said Papists were wicked, and low, and horrid, and told lies and tried to kill people."

That smile of Will's was very encouraging, for Ann went on, "She said I was never to let any one know that I had ever had anything to do with such wicked people; but oh, Will! I often and often thought I'd rather be a wicked Papist like Nora and Eileen than be good like Miss Primmer. I thought I never, never could be of Miss Primmer's religion, and that by and by when I was grown up I'd go back and be a Papist again."

"Poor, little Ann," Will said very gently, "you

shall be as wicked and popish as you like here, and we shall not mind."

" But its quite different now, Will, don't you see? Your religion 's not one bit like Miss Primmer's, for it makes you so good. Oh, Will! I don't understand, it's all so puzzling, but I want to learn to be of Tom's religion, for I know it must be right."

CHAPTER IX.

FIVE YEARS AFTER.

WHAT a deceptive thing time is! At one period it seems to stand still altogether, till we get quite impatient of its utter stagnation; there is not enough motion even to rock our little boat, or stir the broad lily leaves or drag at the long willow boughs that dip in the smooth water, which reflects in glassy stillness the very same green meadows and grazing cows and sleepy blue skies. And then, after we have been fairly lulled to sleep, we wake suddenly with a start. Where is this tearing, hurrying stream taking us? the lily leaves and green meadows have been left miles behind and, on either hand, strange unfamiliar banks are rushing past and the sky is gray and cloudy above, and hark! there is the solemn roar of the great ocean sounding in our ears, where the little river of time loses itself in eternity.

So it was to some extent with Ann, those first days of Tom's absence seemed so long, it was ages till the first Sunday came when Ann had to take Tom's place in church by Mrs. Garnett's side, it was generations before the first letter came, though it was posted at Brindisi. The foreign paper and stamp were sources of the deepest interest to Ann, and Tom's matter-of-fact account of the mail route, which even in the hands of the most skilful weaver

of travellers' tales, affords few incidents worthy of note, read to Ann as a most wonderful succession of hair-breadth escapes and thrilling adventures, to be read and re-read with never-failing delight and admiration.

In those days, "when Tom comes home," had seemed a time infinitely far off, five years of those leaden-footed days were little short of eternity, and now, would you believe it? as Ann stood looking at herself one evening in the little looking-glass in her bedroom (it was always called Tom's bedroom in the first days of his absence), those years were gone, all but one month, and had run away so quickly that it was quite difficult to realize how they had gone.

To be sure there had been plenty to fill up the time, though Ann had not acquired a hundredth part of the accomplishments Tom had sketched out for her; but still she had learned a good deal, thanks to Will, and to a school he had found in a neighboring street, where two kindly, old ladies, very different from Miss Primmer, had taken the girl in hand and had taught her in a gentle, old-fashioned manner, that no doubt would be considered highly unsatisfactory in these days of high pressure. I do not think any of their pupils could have passed the Cambridge local examinations, and as for Girton, such an idea never entered their innocent heads, but theirs was somehow the sort of teaching that suited our ignorant, little Ann, and Will's lessons in the evening perhaps supplied what was wanted in accuracy and precision.

Then there was the housekeeping which fell very soon practically into Ann's hands, especially after Mrs. Garnett's bad attack of bronchitis the winter after Tom left.

And there was dressmaking, for Ann would not let a penny be spent on her clothes, beyond the bare material, and that she made go to lengths undreamed of by dressmakers, who would altogether have refused to believe how few yards would make Ann the prettiest, freshest, little gown in the world. She also seriously offended Mrs. Garnett's dressmaker by persistent inquiries after four yards of material that seemed to have disappeared altogether, and been swallowed up in a certain dress she had made, and Ann was so obliging and ready with a yard measure to prove that those four yards were not to be traced in body or skirt, that the irate lady declared she had never been treated so in all her born days, and she would not stop there to be suspected and spied upon and bully-ragged as had borne a honest character all her life, and had worked for ladies as had behaved as such, and off she flounced, very red in the face, and sent in her bill half an hour afterwards to wait for an answer, and with a little bundle of microscopic pieces, with a withering note to say that these were the pieces as Mrs. Garnett was inquiring after. Of course after this there was nothing for it but for Ann to undertake Mrs. Garnett's dressmaking, which she had all along been desirous of doing, and this secret wish had not made her more conciliatory to poor Miss Pinfold, in the matter of those four yards, and she was so put on her mettle by Mrs.

Garnett's utter despair when Miss Pinfold's indignant flounces quivered out of sight, and her tearful anticipations of never being able to have a new dress all the rest of her life, but having to exist in a dressing-gown or a shawl for ever after, that Ann buckled to with a fierce determination to make Mrs. Garnett a thoroughly successful dress, or perish in the attempt, and she spent so much time flattening her nose against shop windows and following pleasing fashions in the street, getting up early in the morning to try fresh effects and sitting up late at night, poring over fashion plates, that she grew to look quite haggard and worn.

But she was amply repaid by Mrs. Garnett's elegant and distinguished appearance and pleasure therein; if she had been the most sylph-like and graceful figure in creation, Ann could not have contemplated her with greater satisfaction, and when Will, who, of course, could not have had a notion what was going on with such absorption and pins in the mouth, on Ann's part, and shreds of lining and fashion-books on the part of the table and floor, said — “Why, mother, wherever did you raise that new gown? You look like a duchess!” Ann's cup of happiness was full to overflowing, and she fairly wept with delight.

It was quite enough, you will say, to account for Ann's beaming, little face, as she looked into the glass that Sunday evening in May, that the five years of Tom's absence were so nearly over, and that the next mail would most likely tell the exact date of his leaving Shanghai, and the probable time

when they might expect him at home again; and yet, strange to say, it was something much less important that lighted up her eyes and made her heart dance with pleasant anticipations. Somehow, the nearer Tom's return came, the less she thought about it; I suppose in the same way as we lose sight of the mountain tops when we get near to them; they are too close to be seen properly, and even a tiny mound and a couple of pine-trees close at hand will shut out the fair, stately Jungfrau or the noble Eiger.

Now Ann's little mound that shut out Tom's return, was that next day was Whit-Monday and Bank-holiday, and that she and Will were going to spend the day in the country together.

Now she and Will had never been together in the country, the real country where primroses grow, and larks sing, and thrushes build great roomy nests and lay warm blue-speckled eggs. Every summer Mrs. Garnett and Ann had been for three weeks to the seaside — Broadstairs or Eastbourne or Hastings — three weeks of purest enjoyment to little Ann, who brought back such bright, sunburnt cheeks, such health and life and spirits, as well as such pickle-bottles full of sea anemones and strange, unpleasant-looking marine creatures, such loads of pebbles that Mary Anne received with reverence and firm belief in their value, though they certainly looked somewhat dull and uninteresting out of reach of the bright, brisk in-coming tide that creamed over them and rolled them about, and made them look like amber and garnet, topaz, spa, and alabaster; such shells

that crunched under your heel in odd corners for many a month, and long stiff bits of seaweed that hung behind the kitchen door, and were squeezed and pinched by Mary Anne to reveal the prospects of the weather, and occasionally nibbled by Toby, who suspected them of being good for food.

But something had always prevented Will from going with them, and he had taken his holiday elsewhere. One year he had gone over to Brussels with young Frampton, and, at the risk of annoying my readers by another digression, I must warn them on no account to mention that young Frampton's name to Ann, as the color rises in her cheeks, and her young neck bridles, and her little, round chin is drawn up in the prettiest disdain ; she has not a good word to say for this poor, young fellow, who is, in fact, as good-looking and intelligent a youth as you would meet nine days out of ten, and a bit of a scholar too, sitting up late into the night over his Spanish grammar, which he is teaching himself for the sake of an old *Don Quixote*, picked up at a book-stall.

But this mistaken youth had ventured to cast admiring glances at Ann, though if she had had any honesty, she must have acknowledged every time she looked in the glass that there was some excuse for him, and he had proceeded to clumsy compliments, which were more than Ann's temper would stand, and she snapped off the poor, young fellow's nose in a most ruthless and summary manner, and could not be decently civil to him. And then the stupid boy took to looking pained and miserable at her sharp

words, the greatest mistake, believe me, dear reader, that is possible under the circumstances ; unrequited love is so often contemptible in the eyes of its object, and pity is the last feeling to be appealed to to en-noble it. But pity, you say, is akin to love. Very true ; too near akin, like a man and his deceased wife's sister, ever to be made one.

Will was an amused spectator of the little drama, and never failed to speak a good, but rather irritating, word for young Frampton and combat Ann's unreasonable fault-finding. But when, encouraged by Will's kindness and frequent invitations to look in at Paragon Terrace, Frampton became confidential and inclined to open his heart, Will, in a most unexpected and capricious way, flew round, and shut him up more effectually than Ann could have done, and came home in a wrathful condition one evening, talking of "impertinent puppies," though he would not tell either his mother or Ann to whom he was alluding.

But Frampton came no more after that to Paragon Terrace, and we will hope that he soon forgot Ann in the study of *Don Quixote*, or of some equally interesting romance in real life.

Well, as I said before, Ann and Will had never been into the country together, and that spring Will said one day, "Ann, why should n't we two go Maying?"

Ann was threading Mrs. Garnett's needle, and stopped in the middle of the act to consider.

"Not that I know what Maying is," went on Will ; "but next Monday is Bank-holiday, and we might go out into the country for the day, which is, I suppose, the style of thing."

“Yes,” said Ann, but there was a doubtful tone in her voice. Even after five years, some of Miss Primmer’s dicta were still impressed on Ann’s mind, and she remembered how severely that lady criticised any enjoyment that could be shared by what she called the lower orders. Ann herself had often stolen an envious glance at holiday-makers, with faces shining with soap and happiness, clad in all sorts of brilliant and incongruous attire, and laden with babies and big baskets, with black bottles sticking out, and with a tail of children of all shapes and sizes, with cheeks distended, and countenances smeared with toffey and gingerbread. Disgusting spectacle! as Miss Primmer very justly observed; but then, as we have seen in the matter of Punch and Judy, Ann was low in her tastes, and somehow, in spite of the soap and the vulgarity and the toffey, there was something pleasant to her in the sight of human happiness and idleness in the middle of this driving, grinding, weary world of ours.

Will, as usual, rightly interpreted the doubtful tone in her voice.

“I don’t exactly mean a ’appy day at ’Ampstead; but I thought we might go further afield, and get quite into the heart of the country, among the buttercups and the lambs and the apple-blossom, eh, little Ann?”

Ann, for all answer, gave a long sigh of rapture.

“I have my eye,” said Will, “on a farm down in Berkshire, miles away from civilization. I came upon it in that walking-tour I went with Frampton — poor Frampton! Shall we ask him to join the

party, Ann? The blossom will be all out in those big orchards, where we gathered such great, red apples, and there will be cowslips in the meadows by the streams, and nightingales singing in the copse; anyhow, we may count on cuckoos. What do you say, sister Ann — shall we two go a-maying on Whit-Monday?"

Of course she would go! it was as much as she could do to go soberly about her daily occupations for the few days that lay between her and Paradise; her feet would give little capers of their own accord, even going along the aisle in church under the pew-opener's nose, and her lips and eyes smiled so brilliantly even in the street that passers-by were fain to smile back in spite of poor, dull hearts that had no prospect of going Maying with Will.

There was a slight anxiety in the shape of her bonnet to temper her bliss, but even that had disappeared like a breath from a mirror, and now she was smiling at herself in the glass, in the prettiest, most becoming little bonnet that had ever been concocted. She had half a mind to run down and show it to Will, but he would see it, she decided, soon enough, for they were to start off by a very early train, so as to get as long as possible in the country; so she rather reluctantly took it off and betook herself to bed to get as much sleep as her excited, little brain would let her, and Tom's photograph (rather faded in the five years) stared down at her with the same wooden, imperturbable good-nature as ever, though in the agitation of the moment she had quite forgotten to bid him good-night, and, I fear, not for the first time.

CHAPTER X.

GOING A-MAYING.

WHAT a splendid Whit-Monday it was that ye be sure ! a day plucked straight out of Paradⁱ set down in all its tender, holy beauty amo^r fogs and east winds and blights and sullen rain are sent to, and are therefore no doubt profit^a poor English human nature.

Ann woke up with a sob from a cruel drear the rain was pouring down and that she h^d bonnet, but one of Mary Anne's, to put on jumped out of bed to see a cloudless bit o^r between the chimneys and her own little bon ready on the table.

Mrs. Garnett's comfort had been carefull^{ly} vided for and left to Mary Anne's watchful A special old crony was to come over from B to spend a long day with her, with a new kn^{it} pattern and a store of mild gossip to begui time, and Will had insisted on going to the re extravagance of ordering a brougham, for two in the afternoon, to take the two old ladies sleepy drive in the park.

So there was not a shade of compunction in heart that morning as she and Will set off ; except, perhaps, for Toby, who looked up with those expressionless, green eyes that had

seen apple-blossoms or young lambs or any of the beautiful things that Ann was going to see, and she caught him up with a momentary intention of taking him, but wisely thought better of it and set him down again, after a hasty kiss that ruffled that sedate creature's composure for some time, and left him licking his whiskers for at least an hour.

How fresh and bright everything looked even in Paragon Terrace, and the streets that Ann and Will threaded so briskly, the very pavements seemed to have put on a holiday face, and, when they came to Regent's Park, it looked so lovely, with the great plane-trees casting such long, soft shadows on the grass, and the lilacs and laburnums putting forth such a goodly show of shaded purple plumes and golden curls, that Ann slackened her pace and could hardly believe there could be anything better to be found in the country.

“Wait and see,” said Will.

As they came near Paddington, there were more people to be seen in the streets, many of them of that peculiarly Bank-holiday type, described in the last chapter as exciting Miss Primmer's loathing; there were parties too of pale, weary-eyed shop-girls, very fashionably dressed, hurrying along with a brightness in their faces that I hope meant home and mother; and there were sallow, young clerks and shopmen who hardly could have known what the world was like so early in the morning; and sometimes there were the two last species of holiday-makers combined, and these, as a rule, were in less of a hurry and may, I fear, have lost their

train, but perhaps in these circumstances it does not signify.

But Ann and Will caught the train they had intended, and by and by they were off, really off at last. To be sure there was a good deal of pushing and confusion at the station, and the carriage in which they were was somewhat crowded, though three more than the proper number is not a bad allowance for Bank-holiday, and sad to tell one of the men had even at this early hour been imbibing a little too freely ; but then, as Ann said, he was quite at the other end, and she had a comfortable corner by the window, with Will between her and the other passengers, so what harm could befall her? and the poor fellow was really very good-natured and offered her a bit of tobacco-pipe with great politeness, thinking it was peppermint, and told her that Will was a fine young fellow, and just such another as he had been himself, when he went courting his Sall, which Ann could hardly bring herself to believe, any more than in the reality of the peppermint.

But what did it matter what their fellow-passengers were like when the train was running out of London, leaving smoke-grimed houses behind it, running out into the fresh, pure country, where the dew lay thickly on the grass and the sun shone bounteously and graciously, like the love that gave it? Ann was silent, but now and then she would look round at Will, and he understood and answered without a word.

The carriage was nearly empty, when they got out

at a little wayside station, the other passengers had not cared to go so far afield to spend their holiday, and only one or two got out of the train with Will and Ann at Sherford. There was a mouldy, old fly waiting, but Will and Ann scorned such means of locomotion and set off gayly on their five-mile walk, as if fatigue were an unknown quantity, to be left out of all reasonable reckoning.

And what a walk it was! First by a footpath with young springing wheat on either side, clothed with living green, then across broad meadows golden with buttercups, and out into winding lanes between high hedges of quickset, with vigorous young brown shoots and may-buds peeping here and there, and bold branches of sober-leaved honeysuckle and underfoot such broad, tender, pearl-gray shadows on the road, and such patches of bright, sun-lit grass. What painter would venture to paint such vivid color as that bit by the five-barred gate there? He would be scouted in art circles for his gaudy, exaggerated tints, but Nature knows better.

Then they crossed the corner of a park, and had a glimpse of an old Elizabethan house, very beautiful with its chestnut avenue and groups of stately trees; but, after all, in the springtime there is nothing to be compared to the country pure and simple, just nature without any studied effects, trees that have grown up in the hedgerow from seeds that have dropped anyhow, and now stand out in grand contrasts, such as no landscape gardener could hope to equal. See how that oak flings its great arms in front of the Scotch fir, as if just to display its young,

ruddy gold leaves against the blue-gray background, and a dainty ladylike ash has joined the group and droops in pale grace beside the scarred, stalwart trunks of its neighbor. And there is a horse-chestnut spreading out great fans and lighting up milk-white tapers as if to mock at the stiff spruce fir beside it, which might have stood for a giant Christmas-tree, and which has had his triumph all the winter time when his friend was bare, but even now is not content to be outdone, but has put out tender, little, green shoots at all points. And what art could plant out the banks as Nature does, with sweet, pale primroses, making a picture wherever they grow, and feathery ferns unfolding from their croziers and the bold, spotted leaves of the dear lords and ladies with their spiky green flowers, or spread the soft veil of blue-bells under the elm-trees yonder?

Will and Ann lingered long on the wooden bridge over the stream, where the long, snake-like stems of the lily leaves have not yet reached the surface, and where the willows are covering the path with soft gray down from the buds which the country children bring to school on Palm Sunday, and call palm.

Ann could hardly believe they had come a whole five miles, when they came in sight of some cottages buried in orchards, and smelt the pleasant homelike fragrance of wood fires. And this reminds me that it was not sight alone that was filled with beauty.

“If I had been blind, Will,” Ann said, “this walk would still have been most beautiful. You would have had to lead me then, Will,” and she shut her eyes just to try how it would feel and to draw in

the fragrance, but only for a minute, and then she opened her eyes full of tears, to look up into the pink and white glories of apple-blossom above her and the blue sky beyond. "Oh, I'm so glad I'm not blind! Oh, thank God! thank God! I can see!"

They went on in silence for a few minutes after this, Will still holding her hand which he had taken in her imagined blindness, but, indeed, the scents that succeeded one another were worthy of note. First of all there was the smell of fresh growth, and you must come from London to fully appreciate this, and then there were the cowslips in the meadows, and the blue-bells on the banks and the apple-blossom's soft almondly fragrance, and the sweet breath of the cows and the smoke from wood fires, and sweet woodruff, as you tread on its leaves, and bean flowers in the gardens, and the wallflower and sweet-brier, besides a hundred and one subtle odors coming from you know not where.

But by this time they have reached the Rood Farm, for it was in that garden that the beans were in flower, earlier by a week than the cottages round. An old, rambling house is the Rood Farm, tiled and lattice windowed, with a big, roomy, hospitable porch to which a brick path leads you from the straw-yard. White pigeons were strutting and bridling on the roof, and down the brick path toddled a white-headed, blue-eyed baby, not nearly as tall as the great bushes of dark brown wallflower and nearer the level of the ranks of nodding tulips, in all those tints of terra-cotta and brown-yellow and

purplish-red, which are the new fashion in art and the old fashion in nature.

Some calves in the straw-yard with budding horns were a little too friendly for Ann's peace of mind, but Will safely piloted her past them; and there was Mrs. Pither, the farmer's wife, at the porch door to meet them, just out of the dairy, wiping her hands in her big apron, and beaming a hearty welcome, with little Bobby peeping shyly from behind her skirts.

Forgotten Will? Not a bit of it! nor the other young gent neither, and why hadn't he come too? "And this be your good lady, eh? No? Well, glad to see you, my dear, and come in, doee now. We're all in a clutter along of Whitsun market; but there! you'll be wanting a bit of victuals after your walk, and one of the girls shall bring you a somat, and we'll be done in the dairy afore you're a-rested."

And then Will explained that he and Ann were set on a day out of doors, and that if they might have some bread and butter now, and come in by and by in the evening to tea, they would ask nothing better. It was difficult at first to persuade Mrs. Pither that this was what they really wished, as most of her visitors expected a heavy dinner, and a long afternoon sitting up in state in the best parlor; but as she was really very busy and the proposed plan fitted in with her own convenience, she allowed herself to be persuaded, and went back to her work in the dairy, driving two or three rosy-cheeked girls, *who had come to inspect the visitors, back to their work with her, and telling off Jennie the youngest to wait upon the guests.*

Under Will's suggestion she put a little, round table in the porch, and there he and Ann sat and discussed slice after slice of home-made bread and butter, accompanied by milk or home-brewed ale, as their respective fancies led them, till Ann grew quite alarmed at her tremendous appetite, and implored Will to come away at once, or she should finish off the huge crusty loaf at a sitting.

All over the porch was trained a vine, breaking out into strong shoots full of life and growth and promise, and unfolding tiny, yellow-green, shiny, creased leaves and baby tendrils. From the dairy near at hand came the sound of voices, with the slow, clumsy Berkshire accent, and the clacketing of patters on bricks, and the splash of water, and the spat-spat of the beaters making up the shapeless mass of butter, just out of the churn, into rolls for market.

The girls came now and then to peep through the wire-gauze-covered dairy window at the two sitting in the porch, being naturally interested in Ann's dress and appearance; and they made their little jokes about the two, as silly girls will, not recognizing that it was just brother Will and sister Ann, and nothing more.

And by and by Ann and Will got up; and Will called to Mrs. Pither that they would be back to tea, and they wandered away down the grass path between the beans and spring cabbage, and through the white gate in the clipped yew hedge, stopping to admire the peacock cut in the yew, that had a thrush's nest where its heart should be. Then *through orchards*, where each crooked, mossy, old

tree tried to outdo its neighbor in the rosy snow that it displayed, and the cowslips grew large and tasseled in the grass, with good, thick stems that it was a satisfaction to pick, and Ann's hands were full in no time.

Then out into the more open meadows, and through a copse full and fragrant with blue-bells, and where the birds were singing such a chorus that there was no hearing a word besides ; and then they climbed a rough, broken bank, with gorse coming out into golden beauty, and found themselves on the top of what they call a hill in those level parts. It was not much of an elevation to be sure, but you could see round you for a few miles over the tops of trees, with every variety of green ; meadows with cows grazing, snug thatched cottages with blue smoke curling from their chimneys, and a church tower, square and brick and ivy-covered.

And here Will and Ann settled themselves on the soft, springy, thymy grass ; and Will stretched himself at full length and watched Ann making a huge cowslip ball to take back to Mary Anne, and listening to the larks who kept springing up from the turf hard by, and one of them, Ann declared, never came down again, but went right up to heaven ; but if he did, this tiny, feathered Elijah must have left a double portion of his spirit of song behind him, for the sunshiny air was full of that perfect hymn of praise.

“They can't help singing,” Ann said, “they are so happy. Oh, Will ! is n't it lovely ?”

‘ And Will agreed with all his heart, only I hardly

know if he meant the lark's song, or the sunshine, or little Ann sitting with the cowslips in her lap.

How the bright hours hurried by! Ann declared that Will went to sleep, but he knew better; though sometimes in days to come, it all seemed like a golden dream. Sometimes they talked, and sometimes were silent, with a silence more full of sympathy than words; and after one such silence Ann said, with a little sigh of perfect enjoyment, "Will, it seems as if there was no one but you and me in all this beautiful world—no one but you and me!"

And yet, reader, this blind, stupid Will of ours, did not see and understand, did not see what is as plain as daylight to you and me, what those giggling girls at the farm saw, at the first glimpse, through the dairy window—did not understand that for some happy mortals, as in the world's infancy, God yet plants a garden eastward in Eden, and places the man and woman there in the sweet solitude of love.

It was almost unbelievable, when Will looked at his watch, to find that it was past four, and that, as tea was an early meal at Rood Farm, it was necessary to retrace their steps. They ran down the hill hand-in-hand like two children, but loitered so the rest of the way, that some of the farm people came out to look for them, as if they might have got lost like the babes in the wood, when the robins no doubt would have covered them with apple-blossom.

A bountiful tea was spread in the parlor, with a grand display of best china and old-fashioned silver, and Mrs. Pither had donned her Sunday gown of

very creaking, black silk, and the girls also were in Sunday attire, and to Ann's eye did not look half so nice and pretty as they had in their tucked-up cotton gowns and big bib aprons. The farmer himself had appeared on the scene; and a shy, young man, with a sheepish face and very red neck, set off by a vivid blue tie, who was called Joe, and was keeping company with one of the girls, and was accordingly an object of endless rather clumsy chaff from the others, which made him more red-faced and sheepish every moment; and matters were not improved, as far as complexion went, by an occasional sounding slap on the shoulder from the farmer, and, "There now! dontee mind 'un, lad; dash 'un!"

Ann sat silent at tea, while Will talked to the farmer about local politics, and the prospects of the crops, knowing by experience that nothing further from Rood Farm was likely to be interesting, though the farmer carried away the idea that he had heard "a deal of news from Lunnon."

But after tea the girls gathered round Ann and examined her dress, and became confidential about their Sunday bonnets, and wanted to know if it was true that crinolines were coming in again, and how Ann did her hair up.

Jessie, the engaged one, seized a moment when Ann was alone by the bee-hives in the garden, and Will had been carried off to inspect the pigs, to ask in a whisper if she had noticed the young man at tea? and that wicked, deceitful Ann expressed warm admiration for that same Joe.

"He has such a nice face," she said, "and such a — a fine color."

But, dear me! if she had only said half as much, she would have made Jessie her friend for life all the same.

"He's a downright good, young fellow!" she said; "such as any girl might be proud of, and a nice little farm of his own over yonder: and I knew as you'd feel for him and me, though the other girls do make such a piece of fun about it."

And Ann kissed the girl's plump, firm, apple cheek, and wished her every happiness with her Joe, though she could not quite understand why Jessie should have felt so sure of her sympathy.

But the sun was setting behind the big barn; and Mrs. Pither was picking a great nosegay of orange-colored double wallflower, and purple stocks, and yellow and red tulips, and southernwood; and there was a certain little basket, "if it weren't too much trouble to carry it to Mrs. Garnett with my dooty, and I'd like her to taste the Rood butter, as is as good as you'll find between this and Reading, though I say it as should n't."

Jessie was putting Bobby to bed, and held him up at the window in his little shirt to kiss a chubby hand and say "Good-night;" and there were five miles between Rood Farm and Sherford.

The farmer offered to put the mare into his gig and drive them over, but they would not hear of it; so he said he would set them a bit on their way, and show them a short cut. But farmers are not often great walkers, and Farmer Pither was rather

short in the wind, and his gaitered legs bowed, which gave a rolling motion to his gait; and, when he got beyond the limits of his own land, he grew disposed to stop for five minutes at a time, and tap Will solemnly on the arm, while he grew emphatic on the subject of pigs, which are, of course, a deeply interesting topic, but not one worth losing the last train for.

So Will insisted on saying "Good-night," which was a prolonged matter, involving long shakings of the hand, and many last words called out, even when a whole field lay between them. And then Will and Ann were alone again.

"Are you tired, little Ann?" he said, and took her hand and they went on through the soft shadows of the lanes, and across the dewy fields, with the sunset fading into sober tints of deep orange and purple in the west, and a little silver-crescent moon showing, with a bright star to keep her company, over the dark masses of trees that had been golden green when they passed before.

They spoke no word as they went, but once they stopped, and Ann's hand trembled as Will held it; for the long, soft, liquid note of the nightingale sounded from the copse hard by — the most perfect expression of tender love on earth, finding an echo in those listening hearts.

And even yet Will did not understand.

CHAPTER XI.

WILL'S ENLIGHTENMENT.

It was rather more than a week after that blissful Bank-holiday, and Ann was sitting at work by herself one evening, waiting for Will to come in. She was singing to herself over her work, though that work consisted in turning an old dress of Mrs. Garnett's, which is an undertaking, I am told, fraught with difficulties and trials to the patience, especially in the button-hole department; but something of the tender grace of Whit-Monday lingered still over the most matter-of-fact occupations of every day, and cast a certain glamour even over turned button-holes, and Ann sang so blithely that Mary Anne joined in from the kitchen in a gruff tone and somewhat uncertain key.

Mrs. Garnett had gone to pay the return visit to her friend at Brixton, and Ann was to meet her at the corner where the omnibus would set her down, at eight o'clock, so as to ensure her safety from the omnibus moving on while she was making her dignified descent from the step, or from being left stranded in the middle of the road, exposed to all the tipsy cabmen and frantic hansoms who always come driving from the four quarters of the globe at such critical moments.

Will would be in by that time, and would go too,

having a certain authoritative and masterful way with omnibus drivers, and composure with cabmen, which made him a host in himself, and nearly as good as a policeman at a crossing, Mrs. Garnett always said.

But Will was late this evening, and Ann had been more than once to the window to see if he were coming, and to the kitchen to see if the little potato-pie in the oven was not dried up and burnt past all endurance. But still she was not anxious, for Will's coming home was very irregular, and tea was a movable feast most days, and Mrs. Garnett and Ann had fallen into a comfortable and fashionable habit of having a preliminary cup at four o'clock.

So, as I said, Ann was singing over her work, and she only stopped to listen when the hoarse voices of men calling out some bit of news sounded, coming along the Terrace. Ann was too well used to these loud proclaimers of imaginary horrors to feel anything but mild curiosity as to whether it would turn out to-day to be an awful murder in George Street (just round the corner), or elopement of a young lady in Paragon Terrace, the locality changing with each street they came to.

But what was it the men were calling? Something that took every bit of color out of Ann's face, and the smile and the song from her lips, in a moment, and left her white and trembling, clinging to the window-frame, where she had flown to catch every syllable that went straight and sharp and *bitter* to her shuddering, sickening, little heart.

Incredulous? Not she! Though they were the very same men who had shouted murders and elopements and burglaries dozens of times before, it is so much easier to be incredulous if you don't much care if a thing is true or not; and I am afraid it is in human nature not to care very acutely for an awful murder in the next street, or an elopement next door, but it is another thing when the fact announced cuts at your very heart-strings.

“Awful accident on the Metropolitan Railway! Total destruction of two trains! Fifty people killed!”

Surely, even accepting this story as undoubted truth, with all the trains that run daily on the Metropolitan, and all the hundreds of passengers who travel by them, there still might have been a chance of Will's escape; but to poor, little Ann there seemed no hope. Will was among those fifty, poor, crushed bodies done to death in the ghastly darkness underground—Will, her Will, who had lain the other day on the thymy grass and looked up into the blue sky where the larks were singing, the Will who held her hand in the soft twilight when the nightingale gave such sweet voice to what was in their hearts.

She sank down there by the window and covered up her eyes and tried to think, and wondered, in a dull sort of lifeless way, how life could possibly go on without Will, who was life itself, and daylight and air and everything; and then, with a pitiful struggle to be brave and unselfish, she tried to plan

how she should tell Mrs. Garnett and break the blow to her, and spare her some of the dreadful suddenness of it all.

And meantime this same Will had come in, and was standing within a couple of yards of her, rather a dusty Will and cross, moreover, as a man is apt to be who has been kept waiting at the station, for there had been a block, owing to a carriage getting off the lines, which had hindered the traffic for half an hour or so.

For the first minute he did not see the little, crouching figure in the window, but was looking rather discontentedly at the table, where a reel of cotton and pair of scissors had got mixed up with the tea arrangements ; but a little sighing sob drew his eyes to her, and in a moment he was across the room and had lifted her up.

“ Why, Ann — little Ann, what’s the matter ? ”

And then at last he knew — knew by the rapture of relief with which she clung to him, knew by the eloquence of the eyes that were too happy to hide the truth, knew best of all by the passionate feeling that rushed up in answer from his heart, where surely it had lain hidden from the first moment he had seen Ann, but now stood revealed in all its strength and beauty, past all doubt or denial or mistake.

For a moment they were in Paradise — yes, in that shabby, little room, with the tea spread on the table and the milk-jug upset by Will’s sudden passage, with the commonplace and very earthly sights and sounds of the London streets passing the open window, almost at their elbow, with Will dusty

from his day's work, and Ann with a yard measure round her neck, they stood just in Paradise, with hands locked together and eyes reading eyes.

There is a story of a man who, in one moment of concentrated, bitter agony, endured a whole thousand years of his doom in purgatory ; and Will sometimes, in after days, thought that it was reversed in his case, and that the one moment of pure bliss when he knew that he loved Ann and that Ann loved him, contained all the happiness that was possible for him in this world, or that he could picture in the next. For it only lasted half a minute — no more, and then Will dropped her hands almost with a shudder, and turned roughly away, sinking down with a groan into a chair, and covering up his face with his hands, for the gate of Paradise was closed already, and he was outside among the thorns and briars, and the angel with the flaming sword was between him and happiness. Well ! kind, jolly Tom Garnett was not one's ideal of an angel, but it was the thought of him that drove poor Will clean out of Eden after that moment's happiness.

As for Ann, she stood for a minute puzzled and a little dazed ; the violent emotions of the last half-hour had shaken her — the fear and despair, and then the great relief. And now what had happened, and why was Will so unhappy, and why did he look so strange, when just now he had looked — How had he looked ? And at the very thought the blood swept up into her face with a sweet confusion, and she slipped away and up

to her room, where she locked herself in and sat dreaming of that look, and softly stroking the hands that still felt his passionate clasp, and holding first one and then the other against her cheeks that were flushed and hot. She did not quite understand all at once, as Will did, that there was no Paradise for them, and so her feet lingered longer in its pleasant places.

And meanwhile Will was accusing himself of the blackest, basest treachery. Tom had trusted Ann to him with perfect confidence, and now that he was coming back after these years of banishment, he would find that his confidence had been abused and that he had been robbed of the innocent, childish heart that had been given to him so simply when he went away. If Tom had been in England, it might have been different, if it had been a fair field, and Ann had been free to choose between them; but to win her heart away from him while Tom was away, and she pledged to Tom—what could be baser? “I would rather have died first!” he told himself again and again, and meant it too; but though he would gladly have given his life for either Tom or Ann, and though his heart was aching with compunction for Tom, and for the pain that this would surely bring on little Ann, still, in strange perversity, he would not wish it otherwise, would not for worlds have given up that bitter, sweet moment when love spoke from eye to eye and heart to heart, would not even try to hope that Ann’s heart was not in his keeping, even though in that keeping it must needs break.

If only you or I had been there, dear reader, as he sat with his elbows on the table and his hands over his eyes, and Toby made hay while the sun shone and lapped the milk that had formed a little pool on the carpet, to remind him that Ann was only a child when Tom went away, and that he himself had felt confident at the time that Tom's words about marrying her had been merely a joke, though Ann had taken them in earnest, that Tom had never made the slightest allusion to this in any of his letters, and that his messages to little Ann had always been of the most brotherly and easy-going description.

But perhaps it was as well we were not there, for we might have argued ourselves black in the face without producing the least impression. Only a child? Well? it was a white child's face, that very first evening, that went straight to Will's heart, and had lived there ever since, so why not in Tom's? Long absence? other and fairer faces? Pshaw! to love Ann once was to love her for ever, and other faces, if any were fairer than Ann's, were mere pictures or dolls that no one would care to look twice at. And as for Tom sending no message, and making no allusion, was it not far more wonderful that Will should have lived five years under the same roof, and not even recognized till that moment what it was he felt for Ann? And suppose, just for the sake of argument, that Tom had not kept Ann's memory so bright, would not the first sight of her be enough to revive it, for where in the whole wide world was there such another as little Ann? And

Tom should marry her ; never for one moment did Will think of taking her from him. Tom should have her. Poor, little Ann ! would she be happy ? would she ever learn to look up into Tom's eyes as she had done just now into Will's ? Never ! the mere thought of such a thing made Will start up with a pang of sick anguish ; and then he became conscious that Mary Anne was at the door, with round eyes of curiosity and wonder, and that she was asking a question which she had evidently asked several times before, as it had reached a higher key than is generally used for the first time of asking. "Tea ? no, I 'm going out to tea. I 've had tea already ; tell my mother I may be late, and she 's not to sit up for me."

And away he went, to pace about the terraces of Regent's Park till far into the night, rousing dark suspicions in the minds of the police, and trying vainly to tire out the fever in his heart and brain.

And Ann sitting there with the soft flush on her cheeks, and the little smile hovering on her lips, and the dewy brightness in her eyes, heard him go, and remembered with a start that it was past the time when they should have met Mrs. Garnett, and that she would be left to cope with the difficulties of alighting from the omnibus without a friendly hand held out to her ; but before Ann had time to put on her hat, she heard a somewhat ill-used voice downstairs asking, querulously, where Miss Ann was, and why the tea-things were not cleared away ?

CHAPTER XII.

ANN'S ENLIGHTENMENT.

“WHAT is the matter with Will?” Mrs. Garnett was generally the last to notice anything amiss, but even she asked this question many times during the next few days, and Ann could only answer sadly that she did not know.

“He is working too hard,” Mrs. Garnett said, and certainly there seemed a most unusual press of business just then, that made it necessary for him to start off early in the morning, and often kept him out till very late at night. It was not to be wondered at either, that with such hard work, he should be very tired and glad to go to bed as soon as he came in; but, as Mrs. Garnett said, it made the evenings dull for her and Ann, and just in the very middle, too, of that nice book he was reading aloud to them, and she always got so sleepy when she read to herself, and Ann never could resist looking at the end, and that spoilt all the interest to them both, for, of course, Mrs. Garnett could not help asking Ann who died, and who married whom.

And on Sunday, too, Will laid in bed all the morning, and declared in the afternoon that he had a touch of the gout in one foot, which prevented him from going for his usual walk with his mother and Ann; and, while Mrs. Garnett, half in concern and

half in pride, was searching in the depth of her memory for remote ancestors who had suffered from that aristocratic complaint, he spoilt any small gratification associated with the idea, by insisting that it was poor man's gout, unconnected in any way with blue blood or sumptuous living or port wine.

He would not hear of any one staying at home on his account, so Mrs. Garnett and Ann went for rather a depressing walk in Regent's Park, enlivened by gloomy stories from Mrs. Garnett, of early victims that she had known to the gout; but when they came in, expecting to hear groans if not screams long before they reached the door-step, they found that the sufferer had so far recovered as to have gone out, and in his boots too, as both slippers remained in evidence, and when he came home late in the evening he appeared to have forgotten all about the threatened attack.

Those evening French lessons of Ann's, which had been continued after her education at Miss Dorman's had come to an end, and which had given such infinite pleasure to both master and pupil, pleasure, the source of which they had been so slow to discover, now came suddenly to an end, without any explanation.

Poor, little Ann lived in a troubled kind of dream through those days, trouble which was, for the most part, reflected from Will's unhappiness and the change that had come over him. Was he angry with her, that he never looked at her and hardly spoke to her? and why, when it was impossible to avoid a word, was there that new, stiff, unnatural tone, as if it were

an effort to bring the words out, or it may be to keep others in? Why did he never take her hand now in the morning or at bedtime, and why should he go out of his way to avoid passing behind her chair as she sat at work, or meeting her in the passage or on the stairs? What had she done? she questioned. She was silly and frightened, to be sure, when she thought an accident had happened to him, but he had not seemed angry with her at first, it was not displeasure that his eyes spoke when they looked right through her eyes into her very heart; and here Ann's ponderings always ended in that dream that brought the flush into her cheeks, and the hovering smile to her lips.

But to Ann, too, came the enlightenment, though more slowly than to Will, and I think it was one day when she was dusting her bedroom that the trouble first took definite shape, for she stood with that photograph of Tom in her hands for nearly half an hour, gazing and gazing, as if there were something more to be seen than a faded photograph, with an unnatural expression and stiff attitude. She had taken it down from the nail, being struck with a sudden wish, in the middle of dusting its frame, to know if there was really any likeness between Tom and Will, and had carried it to the window to make sure there was none, and, as she looked at it, a sudden wave of memory brought back that first evening when she came to Paragon Terrace, and Tom's kind, smiling face and cheery, honest voice, and the strong arm and generous heart that had rescued her from the storm of trouble and perplexity

that seemed overwhelming her at Miss Primmer's. How grateful she ought to be, dear, good, kind Tom! how could she ever repay him? And then suddenly it came upon her that there was one repayment that had become impossible, that very repayment that she had promised so rapturously when Tom went away. A cold, sickly dread seized upon her heart in place of the warm gratitude; she could not marry Tom; he could not wish it; she had been only a child when he went away; he had only been in joke in what he had said; he must have seen hundreds prettier and cleverer and better than she was; he had never said a word in any of his letters. She went over much the same course of thought that Will had done a week ago, and that he had been wearily traversing ever since, only she made it lead her to the conclusion she wanted, and when she at last put back the photograph on its nail, she had nearly persuaded herself that there was no reason for being ashamed to meet those staring eyes, or to trace a look of reproach in the expressionless, wooden face, and still less to feel such a sinking at the heart, when she thought of Tom's immediate return.

But all these elaborate arguments were upset that very evening, when Mrs. Garnett came in after a little walk with Will, which Ann had not been asked to join. Ann had felt a little bit hurt at this, but pretended to be tremendously busy, so as to convey the erroneous idea that she should not have come if she had been asked; but she could not resist wondering where they had gone and what they were talking about and when they would be back, and she kept

an eye on the window to watch for their return, and so it was that she saw Will's face as he left his mother at the door and walked away, a very gloomy face, with a look of dogged determination as of one who is prepared to cut off his right hand and has already begun that painful operation, and she saw, too, that Mrs. Garnett had a face of importance, as of one who had something weighty on her mind, which must needs find relief through the tongue.

She was not kept long in doubt as to what this weighty matter might be, for Mrs. Garnett came straight in, and, sitting down in the arm-chair, un-tied her bonnet-strings and began:—

“ Ann, Will and I have been talking about you and Tom.”

Ann's heart gave a great jump and the color rushed into her face and she bent lower over her work.

“ You see, Ann, you were such a child when Tom went away, and I thought it was all a piece of his nonsense when he used to talk of marrying you, and really, I'd forgotten all about it till Will reminded me; but, of course, now I quite understand that it was all along a settled thing, and that Tom has not said anything about it in his letters because he took it quite for granted. I am afraid you must have thought me unfeeling sometimes,” went on Mrs. Garnett, and Ann could almost have laughed if she had not felt so miserable, at the notion of any one thinking her unfeeling; “ but I'm sure it's not been for want of love, or because there's any one in the world that I'd rather Tom married, or Will either,” sobbed Mrs. Garnett, now fairly breaking down and

letting the tears roll down recklessly on to her new bonnet-strings, and on to Ann's curly head, which had somehow found its way to her lap. "Will thinks I have been very much to blame. I don't know when he has been so severe with his poor, old mother, but he never spoke about it himself till now, and of course I could n't expect you to, little Ann. Will says that he is sure you are very deeply attached to Tom and, of course, it's very natural; and he says that Tom will be sure to want to settle as soon as he gets home, and that I must make up my mind to lose you. It's all very well for Will to talk, but he does n't know half how much I shall miss you and, of course, he does n't care like I do."

"Does n't he care?" Ann asked her wretched, little heart, with a shuddering sob.

"Ah, now I've made you cry, Ann! like a selfish, old woman as I am, when you ought to be as happy as a bird, when Tom will be coming home so soon. Don't cry, my darling, you won't be parted from us, for I shan't let Tom take you far away, and you'll see me and Will and Mary Anne every day, even if we can't all live together. I told Will I did not see why we should n't move into a larger house, so as to be all together, but he said it would n't do, though I don't think I'm like the mothers-in-law you read of in books, who make themselves so disagreeable, and Will is so used to you, Ann. I'm sure he'll miss you dreadfully, though he won't believe it. Are you cold, Ann, and such a warm evening as it is?"

For a thrill passed through the girl's slight form with the memory of the moment when Will's hands held

hers so tight, so tight as if death itself could never part them, and his eyes looked into hers as if no earthly clouds could ever again stop that love-lightning. Only a week ago ! and now he was calmly arranging with his mother for her marriage with Tom and could not believe that he would even miss her.

When Mrs. Garnett raised the girl's head and looked into her face, there were no tears in Ann's eyes, they were dry and bright and her face pale, and she seemed only intent on wiping those bonnet-strings of Mrs. Garnett's, gently dabbing them with her handkerchief to get out the marks. It was not quite the face of a blushing, expectant bride, whose heart was beating high at the prospect of her bridegroom's return ; but then girls show their feelings so differently, Mrs. Garnett told herself, for she herself had cried persistently for nearly six weeks before her marriage, till her eyelids were like pink caterpillars and her nose like a radish, and it was really quite a miracle that those much-tried members were reduced to proper proportions and color in time for the wedding, but girls' hearts are the same all the world over, and no doubt Ann was feeling the very same for Tom as she herself had done for Tom's father all those years ago.

But, oh ! it was well for girls' hearts, all the world over, that they were not like Ann's was then, for they would have been poor, little, leaden organs, with a dull, heavy ache at every beat.

Luckily for Ann, the postman's knock just then turned the *current* of Mrs. Garnett's thoughts, and *Ann was able to slip away upstairs and lock herself*

into her room and sit down and try to understand the trouble that seemed to have come upon her so suddenly and overwhelmingly.

What could she do? If Tom really cared for her, really held her promised to him, really was coming home meaning to marry her, how could she be so wickedly ungrateful as to object, when he had been so good to her, when she owed him all the happiness of her life, everything, even to her daily bread and the clothes she wore? Surely if any one ever had a right to a girl, Tom had to her; it seemed just then as if he had bought her body and soul, and had a right to take her, or leave her, without a word of yes or no from herself.

Oh, if she might only die instead! if it were just her life he wanted, if that might pay the debt of gratitude she owed him, how gladly she would give it! She would not be afraid of any death, but to marry Tom and to live on for years and years, and, as Mrs. Garnett said, see Will every day, how could she do it?

Oh, Will, Will, Will! Oh, the thymy grass and the larks singing overhead! Oh, the blue, blue sky over her and Will, they two alone together! If only a thunder-bolt could have fallen out of that cloudless sky and killed them both just then, or when they stood hand in hand in the shadow and the nightingale was speaking to them, or for them!

And in the middle of these bitter, passionate regrets that seemed as if they must break her heart, Mrs. Garnett's voice sounded from below calling—“Ann, Ann! come quickly! here's a letter from Tom, and he'll be home in a month.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ONLY ESCAPE.

IT is difficult to say how that month passed, sometimes to Ann's sick heart it seemed slipping away with lightning speed, sometimes she impatiently told herself it never would be gone, and that suspense was harder to bear than anything, and that when Tom had come the worst would be over, and she would not have to wake morning after morning to feel that his coming was one day nearer.

Sometimes, with the desperate hopefulness of youth, she persuaded herself that something must happen, something must stop the smooth stream rushing on to Niagara. She did not pause to think what that something could be, but it was no harm to Tom, ah, no ! his name still came first in her prayers, not only from old habit, but with real intention, though Will's was not mentioned, but only included in "all those whom I love," which also comprised Mary Anne and a variety of others. If that something were to be harm at all, it should be harm to herself, death or some severe illness or disfiguring accident, or perhaps some general catastrophe, such as an earthquake or great fire or revolution, in which the world would get shaken up into fresh combinations, and who could tell whether in such a convulsion, two atoms, now hopelessly separated, might not get cast together by some strange freak of nature?

Outwardly everything went on much as usual. Mrs. Garnett alternated between a blissful state of anticipation of Tom's return and gloomy forebodings of what would become of her without Ann; so she did not notice that Will was a good deal out, and that, when he was at home, he was very quiet, not to say cross, and that Ann was sometimes restless and nervous, starting at a sound and unable to settle to anything, and sometimes sitting for an hour together idle, gazing with her great eyes at nothing at all.

If Mrs. Garnett saw any change in Ann, she set it down to her mind being full of Tom's coming, and she would nod and make signs to Will behind Ann's back, in a manner which irritated that usually amiable son of hers beyond all endurance.

Tom was coming home across America; some friends of his had left Shanghai at the same time and they were travelling together in one party, and a very jolly party it was, from Tom's description; but his letters at the best of times were short and sketchy, and naturally in travelling they became more so, so that the letters posted from Yokohama, San Francisco, and Niagara, were the merest scraps, each one ending up with, "But I am no hand at description, and I must tell you all about it when I come home."

Will had no reason now to reproach Mrs. Garnett for not talking to Ann about Tom, and their approaching marriage: it seemed to him she was always at it, every imaginable subject, however apparently unconnected, was brought to bear on it from mint-sauce to the Lord Chancellor.

He got unreasonably impatient with that kind, foolish, old mother of his, when he saw Ann wince and redden, and met her eyes that could not, at first, get out of the way of appealing to him for protection. Every look seemed to hurt him with sharp, physical pain, and yet, when she learnt not to ask mutely for the help he could not give, and her eyes did not seek his, the pain seemed to Will all the more unendurable, and he would try and make her raise her eyes by a sudden movement, or a word, and then be sorry the moment his effort was successful.

And sometimes he would try and comfort her by talking before her to his mother of generalities, though he knew by hard experience how worthless generalities are to console an individual, for he was always unsuccessfully preaching them to himself. He spoke of time being a great healer, of nothing being incurable, of things being all the same fifty years hence.

Mrs. Garnett was much impressed by his wisdom, though she did not understand what had made him so wondrous wise all at once ; but Ann could have laughed in his face out of sheer bitterness, for she knew how hollow it all was, and knew that he knew it. Fifty years hence ! Oh, how could he mention such an eternity through which they might both live — apart — with the great gulf fixed between them ? Nothing incurable ! what cure was there for life without love ? Time, a great healer ? Pshaw ! it seemed to Ann just then more like a clumsy vivisector, cutting away with its cruel present the fair,

sweet, warm past, and offering in its place a cold, hard, mechanical future, like a wooden leg or a cork arm. Do you call that healing?

Will took his holiday early that year, in July. It was a pity, Mrs. Garnett said, that it could not have been postponed till Tom came home and then, perhaps, they could have gone somewhere all together; but, of course, Will was obliged to take his turn, and perhaps after all it was as well, for he had not been looking at all well lately, though she did not think a walking tour was quite the best treatment for the gout. And it was very odd, too, that she had never heard of this friend of his, Hutton, whom he had promised to go with, and it was very disappointing, after Will had started, to find that Hutton was not going after all, and it was not easy to understand why Will should have scrupulously carried out the tour exactly as it had been originally planned.

It was wet, too, nearly all the time; July was a wet month that year, and a wet walking tour in North Devon by oneself is not the liveliest of undertakings, so it was not to be wondered at that Will came back not looking any the better for his holiday, beyond being rather weather-beaten; it could not be sunburn, he declared, as there had scarcely been any sunshine capable of burning the fairest complexion. He was thinner and looked gaunt and hollow-eyed and a little shabby, but he flattered himself he had picked up a vast amount of moral and mental health and strength in the course of his trudging through muddy lanes and gazing out at smeary, rain-blurred *landscapes* and dun-colored, muddled seas. At any

rate there was not a single day that need have reminded him of that Bank-holiday ; but then, alas ! he needed no reminding, and perhaps the mere contrast was suggestive.

He felt sure when he came back that he was quite hardened, that he had made up his mind to the inevitable, that he was prepared to accept the situation like a reasonable man, and make the best of it, and then, fool that he was ! he came back unexpectedly, the day before he had appointed, and surprised Ann before she could draw on the decent mask she was learning to wear, as Tom's *fiancée* ; surprised her with the glad look of welcome on her face, the look that told that his mere presence was a delight, surprised the sweet love-light shining in her eyes, and, on the spot, all his vaunted strength ebbed away as completely as ever did Samson's under Delilah's scissors, and it was as much as he could do not to take her there and then into his arms, and cast honor and self-respect and uprightness to the winds.

And for Ann, too, his return undid all that his absence had effected, and she knew that her efforts were of no use, that she could not even pretend to love Tom as long as Will stood by, and that it had been mere waste of energy struggling to bring her mind to it. "What shall I do?" she asked, and now there was no time to delay in answering it, for Tom's last letter had been from New York and any day they might hear that he was in England, or he might even make his appearance ; it might have been Tom, instead of Will, who came in that evening so quietly and stood at the door as she and Mrs.

Garnett were in the middle of supper, and what should she have said then?

There was only one way of escape, and that very night that Will came home, Ann made up her mind to it.

“Ann, is that you?” Mrs. Garnett woke up in the middle of the night, conscious that some one was in the room.

“I did not mean to wake you,” said a very trembling, little voice, “but I wanted”—a sob—“to say good-night.”

“Bless my heart! my darling, did I forget to say good-night? It must have been Will’s coming home put it out of my head, but I thought—yes, I’m sure—on the stairs I kissed you, for I remember I dropped my handkerchief when I did it.”

“Yes, yes, to be sure! but kiss me again and say ‘God bless you, little Ann.’”

“God bless you, little Ann.”

But even now Ann lingered, kneeling by the bed, with her head on the pillow beside Mrs. Garnett’s.

“Are you comfortable, dear?”

“Quite, but run away to bed, child, it must be late.”

“I have put your keys on the dressing-table, and your spectacles are close by them; you can’t miss them.”

“Very well, very well,” rather drowsily.

“And—and I’ve picked up the stitches in your knitting, and the next row will be purling.”

Indistinct assent.

“And oh, my dear, my dear! put your arms

round me once more, just once! And say 'God bless you, little Ann.'

In the early morning when it was only just light, Ann was stirring again, and crept downstairs, only this time she had her bonnet on, and a little bag in her hand, packed with a few clothes and some precious possessions that could not be left behind, one or two little gifts of Mrs. Garnett's, Tom's photograph from over the bed, a French exercise-book corrected in a square, firm hand.

She found that it was so early by the staircase clock as she went down, that she could safely spare ten minutes to say good-bye to all the dear, familiar, shabby, old furniture, every article of which seemed to have got so deeply rooted in her affections, that it needed a wrench to part from each.

She peeped into the kitchen where Toby woke from his slumbers on the hearth, and purred and blinked at her, and where Mary Anne's bonnet hanging behind the door seemed to have an actual expression of affection and regret.

The morning light coming in through the fan-light over the door, brought back to her mind, with a pang, the memory of that other early morning, not three months ago, when the brightest, happiest day of her life was beginning, but surely it must have been quite another little Ann who ran down so gayly in her new bonnet and caught up Toby to kiss him!

But as she stood in the passage something white caught her eye on the floor by the door, and when *she picked it up she found it was a letter that must*

have arrived by the evening post and dropped through the open door of the letter-box and been unnoticed. A letter? Yes, and directed by Tom, and bearing the Liverpool post-mark.

She had indeed not gone a moment too soon, he was in England, and it might truly have been he, instead of Will, who appeared last night, and without doubt he would come to-day, might even now be in London, and on his way. A step outside sent all the blood to her heart, and the letter fell from her hands, but a second thought reassured her. Tom was always so considerate and thoughtful, he was not likely to come at four o'clock in the morning, to disturb his mother from her morning slumbers, and besides, he himself, in old days, was not given to very early hours. So she picked up the letter again and carried it into the sitting-room, which was still in the disorder in which it had been left the night before, all so natural and familiar, and yet with a new look of sadness and strangeness as if something were gone, or some one lay dead; and the light through the cracks of the shutters seemed to be pointing cold, reproachful fingers at her, as if she were the wretched, little cause of the change.

She stood looking round on it all, for a minute, and then suddenly dropped to her knees, pressing Tom's letter to her heart and lips in an agony of remorse.

“Oh, Tom, forgive me! forgive me! I can't help it. What could I do? It's not ingratitude, Tom, *not that!* I couldn't be ungrateful. I love you *too much*, Tom, dear Tom, to be able to marry you

without loving you one bit!" sobbed this little, broken-hearted, Irish girl, "and oh, God bless and comfort you! and make you forget poor, wretched, little Ann!"

And then she tenderly wiped off the tears that had fallen on the letter and laid it on the table and dried her own eyes and set her bonnet straight, with trembling, little hands, and then, without trusting herself to take another look, hurried out and began softly undoing the fastenings of the door.

There was another choking "Good-bye, and forgive me," for Tom; another "God bless you, dear," for Mrs. Garnett, another loving thought of farewell for dear, old Mary Anne, but nothing for Will, not a word, hardly a conscious thought, only, as she passed along the little passage, she put out her hand behind her and stroked the sleeve of an overcoat hanging there; only a momentary action without a look, so that, perhaps, it was accidental, or perhaps it was full of more passionate regret, more heart-broken sorrow than any words or actions or tears could in any way express.

CHAPTER XIV.

CARBURY MILL.

ON that very same day that Ann left Paragon Terrace, only a few hours later in the morning, a very naughty, little boy was being dressed much against his will, writhing and wriggling fat shoulders and dimpled elbows to the great exasperation of the old woman who was trying to put on a small shirt and knickerbockers.

Such a scowling, little face it was, too, with brows drawn together till they formed one straight line over the cloudy, gray eyes, and the baby teeth bit the rosy under-lip with quite a ferocious expression, and the fat, little fists doubled up as if they were prepared to give some one a crack on his knowledge-box, or tap an adversary's claret, and all these demonstrations of wrath were directed, not against old Mrs. Griffith, as you might have supposed and as she really did suppose, but against Ann, our poor, little, inoffensive, unsuspicuous Ann, who had never even heard of the existence of this bad, little boy down at Carbury Mill, a hundred and fifty miles away from London, even if she had heard of Carbury itself, which is more than doubtful.

Not that Hal had any prophetic revelation that Ann was coming, but he knew that Grandy had gone up to London to find some one to look after

him, and Mrs. Griffith kept assuring him that "he'd ketch it," and "her'd make him mind, a bad, wicked boy," with more remote allusions to canes and being put in the corner, and indefinite terrors of bogey and black men; so Hal doubled his fists and bid defiance to the some one whom Fate decreed to be our Ann.

You see matters had come to a climax with Hal the day before, when he had been fished out of the mill stream and brought into Grandy's office dripping and plastered with mud and green weed, and very spluttering and frightened. Grandy was not very angry with him, not nearly so angry as when he had gone up in the crane, or that day when he crept in among the machinery after his ball and the mill had to be stopped before he could be got out.

Grandy stripped off the child's wet clothes with his own hands and rolled him up in a big plaid and set him in the arm-chair in the office, and had the fire lighted, though it was the beginning of August, and let him have the pen and ink and any amount of foolscap paper to draw on, which kept the young sinner quiet for at least half an hour, when he suddenly remembered it was time to feed the horses, and would have forthwith gone out without any further adornment than a few ink-spots, if Grandy had not caught him and brought him back to the plaid and the arm-chair, where happily for the peace of mankind he fell asleep.

Grandy had forgotten all about him till a substantial farmer, substantial in every sense, prepared to sit down in the arm-chair to have a

business talk with "Muster Loxton," and was quite upset mentally and almost bodily by sudden howlings and the appearance of a creature who might for all the world have been a cupid off a valentine, or one of the marble cherubs on the tomb near his pew in church.

The farmer could not compose his mind after that to the calm discussion of business, and Hal was the cause of Grandy's missing a most favorable bargain that had been very nearly concluded, and after the farmer was gone, Grandy sat in moody reflection for nearly half an hour, examining his broad, ribbed thumb-nail, as he always did when in any perplexity, and apparently quite unconscious of the absurd effect of Hal clad in his (Grandy's) hat and coat, the hat with its brim resting on his shoulders and the coat dragging far on the ground behind, marching up and down the room.

"Look here, my man," Grandy said at last. He always spoke to Hal as if he were a reasonable person, or, at least, as reasonable as other grown-up people; "look here, I'm going up to London to-morrow to find something of the womankind to take you in hand, and I shall pack you off to Filbert Farm with her."

The child in his strange attire came across and laid both dimpled hands and a curly head on the drab-gaitered legs, crossed over one another, and a small, bare foot on the large boot, and looked up very coaxingly into the grave, business-like face, with such hard lines on either side of the firmly closed mouth and such keen, small, Scotch gray eyes looking out from under the tufted gray brows.

"A terrible, hard hand at a bargain," the Carbury folks said.

"He's like one of his own millstones," said unsuccessful impostors.

"He's just cast-iron, and there ain't no pity nor Christian feeling in him," said more than one who had received summary justice at the hands of the miller.

But Hal did not seem to have any fear of the old man, but then he was a daring, young rascal and not easily frightened.

"Grandy," he said, "I won't never be a bad boy no more and get into the water."

"No, old chap, you won't have the chance."

"Grandy?"

"Well?"

"I don't think I'll be a good boy at Filbert Farm at all."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," said Hal thoughtfully, having by this time perched himself on Grandy's knee and beating a gentle tattoo on the gray gaiters with two pink heels; "but I 'spect I'll be horrid naughty there."

"That's a pity, for there's a pony over there, anyhow will be soon, not much higher than the table, that wants riding, but he only does for good boys."

Silence.

At last, "What's his name, Grandy?"

"Whose?" thought having travelled to other subjects.

"Why the pony, what won't do for bad boys?"

“ Name? let me see,” having to invent on the spur of the moment, and invention not being Mr. Loxton’s strong point; “ why, Blunderbuss, to be sure.”

Another long silence and gentle drumming of young heels, and at last, “ Grandy, if I was a terrible good, little boy and never went up in the crane or rode old Roarer or fell into the water or — or — ”

“ Well?”

“ Might n’t I stop at the mill and — ”

“ Well?”

“ Have Blunderbuss to play with me?”

“ No.”

A very thriving affair is Carbury flour mill. For miles round Carbury, you can see the tall chimney pouring out great clouds of smoke, and far beyond that you meet the great lumbering wagons laden with dusty sacks, bearing the stamp, “ Loxton Brothers,” and beyond that again, along many railway lines, you may recognize the name on heaped-up trucks hurrying in various directions.

When Loxton Brothers began working that mill, there were just those two themselves and one man under them to do all the work, and quite enough too, they found, when they came to divide the profits; the machinery was as old as the hills and one rickety cart and old gray horse was sufficient to do all the carrying they needed.

Every one prophesied that the two young men would make a mess of it, as a succession of millers had done before them; but Michael and Henry

Loxton were from the north of England, and had some of the old border blood in their veins and a great deal of Scotch cannyness in their brains, and were very different sort of men to the easy-going natives of Carbury, who began making a mess of life from their cradle, and messed along pretty comfortably to their graves.

Moreover the Loxton Brothers had a careful, hardworking mother, and, I believe, that was half the reason of their success; for she toiled and moiled for them from morning to night, and never let another hand cook for them or do for them or darn their stockings or make their shirts; and when the money began turning and growing as it turned, and the townspeople began to look on the brothers as rising and substantial men, and when Michael declared that the time had come for his mother to take a bit of rest and have a servant girl, she just took to her bed and died, with a resigned sort of feeling that there was no further use for her in the world, and that both Michael and Henry had a good store of shirts that, with care, might last them for many a year.

Before her death she had seen a good many changes at the mill, and there were more after; by the time Ann made acquaintance with it, there was scarcely a bit of the old building left, the rotten, old timbers stained with all sorts of colors, by damp and old age, the tiled roofs laden with house-leek and moss, and hoary with lichen had disappeared and given way to severely matter-of-fact and ugly, red brick buildings, extending nearly quarter of a mile

along the river side, and there was a siding from the railway brought right into the court-yard, by which trucks went and came to be loaded or unloaded. Tall chimneys, too, were run up, for steam did pretty much as water with the new machinery, and inside the changes were even more extensive than outside, and the newest inventions and the most ingenious improvements soon found their way to Carbury Mill, and when Michael or Henry disappeared for a month or two at a time from Carbury, people guessed that he had gone to Germany or America to study some new method and, ten to one on his return, some astonishing change was made, which apparently was as profitable as it was surprising.

People at Carbury used to discuss, if it were hard work or good luck that turned the Loxtons into wealthy men, where other folks jogged along without rising an inch above the level on which they started, or more frequently sank a good many inches below it. They generally concluded that it was sheer good luck, but as they themselves never attempted the other alternative, hard work, the question was never satisfactorily settled.

Instead of the broken-kneed, old horse, there was quite a regiment of sleek, well-fed beasts in the comfortable, new stables, or drawing the big, yellow wagons along the roads, and, in the place of the one man employed, there were fifty, but, for the most part, not Carbury men, but drawn from that vague locality, "up the country," where people seem to be more used to work than the Carbury folk, and think

it only fair to give an honest day's work for an honest day's wages, whereas in Carbury the prevailing notion was to do as little as you could and get as much for it.

The least change observable in the whole place was in Michael and Henry Loxton themselves, and in the little, dull house adjoining the mill, where they lived. To be sure the two brothers grew to look older, as the years rolled on, but not by any means in proportion to other people. Michael was a little bit bald on the crown and Henry on the temples. Henry was stouter and Michael stooped more than when they first began business at the mill. By and by there was a little gray mixing with their hair and whiskers, but every one was so used to the sprinkling of dust that they did not notice the gray at first, till the jolly miller, Time, sprinkled his dust more and more thickly till their heads were white even without the flour ; and, at last, one fine day, some impudent, young rascal spoke of them as the old Loxtons, and Carbury suddenly awoke to the fact that they were old men.

And meanwhile they had gone on living much as they had done in the old days when money was scarce. After their mother's death an old house-keeper had been engaged to do the work of the house, which grew duller and less attractive year by year ; the plants that Mrs. Loxton used to keep in the parlor window died away and no fresh ones took their places, the little best room which was her pride grew damp and smelt like a tomb when either of the brothers by chance opened the door, and they grew

by degrees to live almost entirely in their offices in the mill, which were far more comfortable and cheerful, and only used the house for sleeping and taking their meals.

They neither of them married ; at first they were too busy and too poor, and if any fancy ever crossed the heart of either of them, it was soon put aside.

“ I ’ll wait a bit,” Henry used to say, “ till I ’ve a decent home to offer the girl I marry.”

They were canny, cautious, young fellows, not to be led away into any foolishness by a girl’s bright eyes or pretty ways ; but the worst of it was, as they grew older, they grew cannier and more cautious, when there was not so much need for such prudence, and they suspected that it was only for the more than decent home they could have given her and for the money that was every year getting more plentiful, that Jenny blushed and laughed so prettily, or Mary put on such gay ribbons and pretended to be so interested in machinery ; and they were too wise to be married for their money.

Besides this they did not care for society, and I am not surprised at them, for society in Carbury, at any rate such as was open to them, was not of a very attractive quality. But I do not think I need trouble the reader with any more retrospects, for it was not till Michael Loxton was sixty-eight that he crosses the arena of my story in the character of Grandy, and by that time Henry had been dead three years, so I need hardly have mentioned him except so far as to explain the Loxton Brothers on the carts and sacks, and to account for a certain incomplete-

ness about Michael, who never seemed quite the same after he buried his brother.

People in Carbury prophesied that he would not long survive Henry, and then wondered where all the money would go to. Mothers with large families looked with a sigh at deserving but unlucky children, and wished that Bob or Johnnie would take old Mr. Loxton's fancy; and disinterested fathers would suggest that he would find Sydney or Albert quite a lad after his own heart, "such a head-piece that young fellow has, though I say it!"

Michael Loxton was not disposed to be confidential with any of his Carbury neighbors and kept his own counsel; so it took all the world by surprise when little Hal Loxton appeared one day at the Mill, and people suddenly remembered or, for the most part, learnt for the first time that Michael and Henry Loxton had had an elder brother who had gone to Australia, and who now sent home this small orphan grandson to the care of his brothers, whom he could hardly realize to be old men like himself, having last seen them when they were not very much bigger than this same sturdy, little Hal of four.

In all Michael Loxton's long and eventful business life, he had never been more perplexed than when a brown-faced, foreign sailor arrived unexpectedly at Carbury with little Hal, handed over the letters proving his identity, and took his leave in ten minutes' time.

Michael Loxton had done business with a variety of men and women, but never with a young person of four, who stood with his legs planted rather wide

apart, and his hat on the back of his head, gnawing a large ship's biscuit and surveying the tall, gray, old miller with fearless, scrutinizing eyes. The miller was much the most shy and embarrassed of the two, for Hal had been passed from hand to hand ever since he was born, and had found that strangers, as a rule, were always good to him, and besides, on the whole he approved of this second edition of his grandfather left behind in Australia.

I do not know what would have happened if Hal had cried or fretted, but he at once made himself at home and adopted a sort of patronizing tone to Mr. Loxton, whom he named Grandy, explored the mill, especially in its more dangerous and remote parts, made friends with and ordered about the men, began an active feud with the housekeeper, Mrs. Griffith, who could not abide children, and who did not at once recognize him as the master; got on the most intimate terms with the horses, especially those who kicked and bit; and marched straight into the heart and the kennel of the ferocious, old yard-dog, who ran a narrow risk of being shot on the occasion of Hal's first visit, as the men made sure that the child would be despatched forthwith.

So the question as to who would be Michael Loxton's heir was finally set at rest, though every day that Hal was at the mill, it seemed likely that the question might be re-opened, as the child was a perfect monkey for mischief, and was constantly endangering his life by his reckless doings, till, as we have seen at the beginning of the chapter,

ael Loxton felt that the climax had been
ned, and that the child's safety, and his own
e of mind, required that Hal should be placed
of the reach of mill-ponds and machinery and
some one to take care of him and begin his
ation.

CHAPTER XV.

WANTED — A GOVERNESS.

MICHAEL LOXTON's and Ann Nugent's experiences that day in London were an interesting contrast, as they were made from directly opposite points of view, that of employer and employed; but I must not stop to develop the subject here in its general bearings.

Mr. Loxton's requirements seemed so very simple that he thought, and so should I, that there would have been no difficulty in fulfilling them. He wanted a young lady (not a fine lady), who would take care of Hal and play with him and be kind to him, and teach him a little. Though Mr. Loxton was by no means a gentleman, nor had had much experience of that class, he had a very settled idea of what a lady was, and not at all a bad one either, and he was not to be taken in by the outside polish, or very thin veneering, that satisfies some people; he did not require much learning, for Hal's education was at present simply nil, and a very ignorant person might yet have taught that small dunce a great deal, but in his business experience he had learnt to distrust people who blew their own trumpets too loudly, and he shrewdly suspected that the ladies who laid claim to such a wonderful variety of attainments and accomplishments might, when

it came to the point, be incapable of imparting properly even the three R's. Good-temper, again, was quite essential, and being a good judge of a horse, he thought he could detect vice under the sweetest of smiles and in the most honeyed accents. And last, but not least, though Michael Loxton was sixty-eight, and had never married nor thought of marrying, and though his old housekeeper, Mrs. Griffith, was as ugly as sin, still he had a great notion of good looks and knew that Hal was of the same mind, and, I am afraid, that some of the excellent ladies he interviewed that day, at various registry offices and institutions, lost their chance of a situation, which, no doubt, they would have filled admirably, through some such utterly insufficient reason as a drab complexion, red nose, blue spectacles, or projecting teeth.

And so it was that at nine o'clock that evening, Michael Loxton found himself at Paddington, quite unsuccessful in his mission, sitting in the waiting-room, gloomily turning over half-a-dozen cards, with the names and addresses of the six most promising, not one of whom could he endure to think of, for two minutes together, as the person to whose tender mercies little Hal was to be given over.

He was too early for the train by nearly an hour, and as he sat back on one of the sofas, he drowsily watched the people who came and went, hardly noticing them, so much was his mind taken up with the difficulty as to how he was to take care of Hal.

So he paid no special attention to a girl who came

wearily in and sank down on a seat at right angles to the one where he was, and he would not, perhaps, have looked at her again, if a sob had not caught his ear, and then he saw that her face was covered with her hands and bent down nearly to her knees, and that she was shaken with hysterical sobs which she was evidently struggling violently to repress.

His first inclination in these circumstances was to get up quietly and go away, in which case the course of my story would have taken a very different turn and not a brighter one, I fear, for poor, little Ann ; for Ann of course it was, as my readers will have guessed.

Do not think, however, that she had been crying all day ; indeed, she had wiped the last drops away on the steps at Paragon Terrace, and had kept a very brave heart, and determined, little face all day long, as she went from one registry office to another, vainly seeking a situation.

She was not at all extensive in her demands, she laid claim to hardly any accomplishments, she was willing to undertake any amount of work of the most menial description, for the lowest possible wages, she did not even call it a salary, if only she could find people who would be kind to her, and a roof to shelter her. She seemed so piteously unprotected directly the door of Paragon Terrace closed on her. She had often been about by herself ; she was by no means one of those girls who have been kept in cotton-wool, or under a glass case, till they are unfit for contact with the outside world. She had threaded her way fearlessly through

noisy, bustling thoroughfares, or by poor, unfrequented streets, and had never met with any rudeness, nor feared any ; but now it seemed as if all the world were against her, people jostled her roughly, men stared at her with eyes that made her sick and hot with shame, boys shouted at her, the water-carts splashed her as they passed ; it seemed as if they all knew she had no home to take refuge in, and no one to protect her or avenge her if she were hurt or insulted.

But even the streets seemed more tolerable to her as the day went on, than the registry offices and the ladies who interviewed her there, when they heard that she could give no references, and declined to tell her home address.

They were smiling enough at first, these ladies who require of their governesses such a curious mixture of avocations : “ Intellectual conversation, and to brush the elder daughter’s hair,” “ fluent French and German, and to bathe two little boys,” “ brilliant execution on the piano, and to help once a week in the laundry,” and offer “ a salary ” of about one-half the amount that an ordinary cook would descend to accept.

Poor, little Ann would have brushed hair, and bathed babies, and washed and ironed with all her heart, and thrown in all her poor, little accomplishments gladly for nominal wages ; but her want of references always brought the negotiations suddenly to an end, generally with looks or words from the ladies that sent Ann out of the room with flaming cheeks and indignantly beating heart, only half under-

standing what they meant, but knowing that it was intended to be shameful and insulting.

And then the silly child had nothing to eat all day, knowing how little there was in her purse, and getting every hour to see more plainly how difficult it would be to add to it; and it is not to be wondered at that she grew very weary and faint and foot-sore and not by any means fit to battle on and make her way.

But there was one resource which she had in reserve, not to be made use of if anything else turned up. The Miss Dormans had given up their little school, soon after Ann had left them, and had gone to live at Ealing on the very modest competence they had scraped together in the course of many weary years of tuition. They had always been very kind to Ann, and, more than once since they left, had written to ask her to come and see them, and Ann had often promised and planned to do so, only had never accomplished it.

At any rate, there was a welcome for her there, and they would certainly help her to the best of their abilities to find a situation; but they were very poor, and could ill afford the generosity they were sure to lavish upon her, and besides when she was missed from Paragon Terrace, and search was made for her, it was most likely that Miss Dormans' would be thought of as a place to find the runaway; and, sore as was the longing for home that came over her many a time that day, she never wavered in her resolution, or let herself fancy for a moment the delight of being *found* and taken home and scolded and comforted.

It was no whim or caprice that had driven her away, and even when she felt most lonely and footsore and desolate, she felt she would rather endure that and a great deal more, than marry Tom without loving him, with Will standing by.

But as evening came on, there seemed no resource but the Miss Dormans', and she set her face towards Paddington, resolving that she would make the old ladies promise secrecy, and that she would go off again next morning on a further, and it was to be hoped, more successful search after employment. She was very tired, as I have said, but the mere prospect of seeing the kind, old, familiar faces, and of the little fuss there would be over her, and the bed that would be made ready for her, seemed to revive her, and the long walk to Paddington was beguiled by the thought of it.

There were a good many people taking their tickets, and Ann had to wait for her turn, but when at last it came, and she felt for her purse, she found that it was gone, and that the ticket to Ealing, though it only cost sixpence, was as impossible to her as if it had been a hundred pounds. When had her pocket been picked? How long had it been gone? She did not know, she hardly seemed to care, she felt stupefied and unable to think or wonder, still less to suspect or accuse any of the people near her; but she just slipped out of the row of people waiting to take their tickets, and leant against the wall with her hand in her empty pocket, staring blankly at the flickering, cold, electric light that is surely as hard and unsympathetic and cruel as light can be.

She even smiled to herself, thinking how careless she had been, and what a good thing it was she had not, as often happened, the money for paying the weekly bills, but only a few shillings ; and then she realized that it was her all, and that it was gone, and that she was so faint and weary she could hardly walk across the station, and that miles of unknown road lay between her and Ealing. And then she saw some one looking at her curiously, and she took up her bag and walked as steadily as she could into the waiting-room, where, at any rate, she could rest and think what was best to be done ; and then, as we have seen, she sat down near Michael Loxton, who was the rather alarmed spectator of the overwhelming outburst of grief that followed her first attempt to think calmly and composedly.

There was no one just then in the big waiting-room besides those two, and as Ann appeared to be, and indeed was, quite unconscious of the shrewd-faced, old man, with his gaitered legs crossed, and his hat tilted low over his eyes, he did not follow his first inclination to take flight, but sat silently observing her from under the brim of his hat.

The first paroxysm was over, and Ann was getting a little more control over her feelings, and Michael Loxton was debating within himself what he should say to her, or if he should say anything, when a bustling, little lady, laden with multifarious parcels of all shapes and sizes, came into the waiting-room, and at once pounced upon Ann full of questions and sympathy and consolation.

If kind words and fuss may be regarded as representing the wine and oil, this little spinster certainly fulfilled the part of the good Samaritan to our poor, little Ann, who had indeed fallen among thieves ; and then, I am afraid, the part of priest or Levite must be assigned to Michael Loxton sitting there “on the other side.”

But there is also a proverb that comes into my mind, as I think of the situation, “ fine words butter no parsnips,” — though, by the way, I never could bring myself to imagine that butter would be any improvement to that particularly unpleasant vegetable, — for Miss Finch did not go beyond the wine and oil of words, and there was no offer of setting little Ann on her own beast, which in this case would have been a very simple matter of getting a ticket to Ealing. But perhaps the offer of more substantial help was put out of her head by the arrival of that same “ beast ” at the platform whistling and screaming and puffing in a manner calculated to upset the elderly female mind, and Miss Finch quickly began collecting her parcels and preparing to run wildly up and down the platform, asking bewildered questions of every one she met, as is the manner of such.

“ Good-bye, my dear,” she said to Ann, as she flustered out of the waiting-room ; “ I hope you will get to — ” and here she began running madly, and the rest of the benevolent wish was lost in the distance, and she was out of sight in a moment, only flashing past the waiting-room door once or twice like a meteor.

She was a kind-hearted, little woman, Miss Finch, and she expended much sympathy on Ann, and for the next few days described the affair to most of her friends, with a little addition each time.

"I was really quite inclined to offer to pay her fare; but one never knows, there's so much imposition in the world, and she really was almost too pretty, you know, to be quite respectable; and I've never got over that nice-looking, young German, who could not speak a word of English till my brother asked him if he would take a glass of beer, when he said, 'Thank you, sir!' in the plainest good English, so it's as well to be on the safe side."

And the "safe side" was certainly the side the priest and Levite went on in the parable.

Ann was not disappointed by Miss Finch's empty sympathy, for she did not expect anything, and, indeed, she was rather relieved when the quick patter of short questions ceased, and she was left at peace to lean back and shut her eyes and try to think she was feeling better, and should soon be able to get up and start on that dreadful dark road by herself. But a minute afterwards she heard another voice, gruff and deep, just over her, and, looking up, saw a tall, old man, with a cup of tea in one hand, and a plate of buns in the other.

"I've brought you a cup of tea," he said. "I was having some myself, and I thought you'd like some. Oh, yes, I know you've lost your purse! You can pay for the tea another day; it's no great matter."

Michael Loxton was used to be obeyed, and there was a certain air of authority about him as he put down the cup and plate by Ann, and went off to finish his own repast; and when he came back, he found Ann looking decidedly better for the tea and buns, and making ready to set off on her walk.

“Wait a bit,” said Michael Loxton; “I’ve something to say to you first. I heard you tell that woman that you had been seeking a place all day and could not hear of one. Now I’ve been seeking a governess for my little grandson all day, and could n’t find one to suit. Now I don’t see why we should n’t strike a bargain — eh?”

Then he folded his arms and looked at her, and she looked up at his face much as Hal had done when first he came to Carbury, and saw through the hard lines and shrewd, frosty eyes and stern mouth, as Hal had done, into a kind heart.

“You’re very kind,” she said, with a little tremble in her voice. “But, you know, I have no references.”

He did not ask any questions, but sat waiting.

“I left my friends, such kind friends! and my home, such a dear home! this morning, and I do not want them to know where I am,” the girl went on in quick hurried accents.

She had not told the inquisitive ladies at the registry office half as much even as this.

“But there was nothing wrong, nothing to be ashamed of. They are looking for me now; they would take me back this moment, and I should be so glad, so thankful to go, only — ” and here her sobs choked her, and Michael Loxton put out one of his

large, hard-working hands, with the big veins standing out on it, and laid it on her arm.

“That will do,” he said. “You need n’t tell me any more.”

And then he told her about Hal and about Filbert Farm, two miles out of Carbury, where she and Hal would live, not seeing any one, quite out of the way.

“It’s not very lively,” he said; “there’s no gentlefolks living anywhere near, except the old parson; and if there were, gentlefolks have n’t been much in my way, for me and mine have been plain folks, though, perhaps, we may make a gentleman of Hal by and by. You could teach him a bit, could n’t you?”

And then Ann gave a very modest account of her attainments, which impressed Mr. Loxton far more favorably than the lists of accomplishments that some of the ladies had laid claim to.

“When would you want me?” asked Ann.

She could hardly believe in the reality of this piece of good luck, that had come when she was almost in despair. Walk to Ealing! Why, she could have walked twice the distance, and she had no doubt that Miss Dorman would let her stay there till she was wanted at Carbury.

“Well, if you did n’t mind going down to-night, it would suit me best.”

“To-night?”

“Oh, never mind! if you want a day or two to think it over; but I thought, as I was going down, I could see after you, as maybe you’re not much used to travelling.”

Ann stopped a minute. It rather took her breath away, the suddenness of it all; and then she said —

“ Yes, I’ll go to-night.”

“ All right,” was the answer, as Mr. Loxton got up; “ then I’ll go and get your ticket at once. The train is due to start in five minutes.”

Which of the two, reader, do you think was the most reckless and foolish in this hasty arrangement? There is no fool like an old fool, and certainly Michael Loxton had nearly fifty years the advantage of Ann in age, so undoubtedly he was most to blame. And, besides, those fifty years had been all passed in hard, matter-of-fact business, which ought to have made a man wise and prudent if anything could. He had, in the course of business, engaged men hundreds of times and had been taken in, though not perhaps as often as most men, by pleasing appearance and plausible speech. And yet in his sixty-eighth year, after ten minutes’ conversation, he engaged this girl simply on the strength of a sweet, sad face and large, innocent eyes.

As for Ann, she was young and nearly in despair, which may be some slight excuse for running such a risk as going off to an unknown place with an unknown conductor, who might, for all she knew, have been the deepest-dyed of old villains and reprobates. And another excuse for her was, that her former experience had been so encouraging, for she had known quite as little of Tom Garnett, and certainly she never had had reason to repent her trust in him, when she put her hand in his, and he led her

out of Laburnam Villa. But, oh, how Will would have raged and fretted if only he could have known!

I think of the two that Michael Loxton had the most misgivings, for as the train ran on through the darkness, he kept peering across the carriage at Ann, who had sunk into the deep sleep of exhaustion and fatigue, with her head resting back in the corner, so that the lamp shone on her pale, young face, with the long, wet lashes lying dark on the white cheek, and the hair gently stirred on her forehead by the night air; while as for little Ann herself, fears and anxieties were left behind, and she was safe at home again, covering jam-pots with Mary Anne in the little kitchen.

It was the small hours of the morning when Carbury was reached, and the dawn was beginning to make the east gray and the air chill. Ann was still half asleep as Mr. Loxton helped her out of the carriage, and, taking her bag, bid her follow him.

“It’s not far,” he said, “and the omnibus does n’t meet this train.”

They went along some narrow lanes with high walls on either side, and at last he opened a small door in a large gate, and they passed through into a big yard, paved with rough cobble stones, and across this a light was dimly twinkling in a small window, the first Ann had seen since they left the station.

Mrs. Griffith, after some knocking, made her appearance in her night-cap, grumbling under her breath. Mr. Loxton had given orders before he left to have a bedroom made ready, in case he should

bring a lady back with him, and there was also supper of a very dull and uninteresting description prepared for the travellers. But if it had been nectar and ambrosia from the table of the gods, Ann would not have noticed ; she was sunk in a kind of torpor of weariness and sadness, and only wanted to creep anywhere out of sight ; and Mr. Loxton soon gave up his efforts to make her eat, and called Mrs. Griffith to show her up to her room.

“ You ’ll have a handful,” the old woman said, as she led the way up the steep, narrow staircase. “ He ’s a limb, is Master Hal, and no mistake ! And you don’t look over and above strong, neither. The only soul as he ’ll mind is his Granapa, and when he ’s out of the way, there ’s no doing nothing with him. My legs is black and blue with his kicking, and if he was agoing to stop on at the mill, nothing should akep me here much longer. I ’d sooner a’ starved ! Here, just step in and look at him. The piece of work as I had to get him to bed, the young monkey ! ”

Ann followed her in at the first door they came to, which stood open, followed duly and with as little curiosity as if Mrs. Griffith were proposing to show her a pig or a mummy.

“ Just look at him ! ” grumbled the old woman, standing by the side of the bed, and holding the candle high so as to throw its light on the occupant ; “ with every mortal rag of clothes kicked off, and the pillow on the floor.”

And all at once Ann seemed to wake from that leaden dream of sorrow, to see something through

the cloud of listless apathy. She saw rosy, rounded limbs tossed anyhow in sweet, careless grace, and a curly, tumbled head, and cheeks flushed with slumber, and she bent down and kissed the little, half-open mouth, and, as she did so, Hal half woke and looked with dazzled, sleepy, blue eyes up at her.

He had been fully prepared, as we have seen, to receive her as an enemy, and to behave as badly to her, yes, and a thousand times worse than he had to Mrs. Griffith ; but, somehow, the first sight of her face, which one Will Garnett, now a hundred and fifty miles away, would tell you is the sweetest face on earth, seemed to change his determination. Perhaps in some baby dream his dead mother had bent over him with such a gentle face ; perhaps his guardian angel looked as sad and sweet when he came to trouble the waters of that shallow, little Bethesda, Hal's conscience ; but certain it is that two, warm, young arms were thrown round Ann's neck to pull her face down to a sleepy kiss, and though the clasp was tight and rather choking, and the kiss a trifle sticky, they brought the first touch of comfort to her forlorn, little heart, and she went away with a smile on her lips, that seemed of late to have forgotten the way to smile.

CHAPTER XVI.

FILBERT FARM.

“It’s a terrible lonely life for a girl,” Mrs. Sydney would say, “and not one in a hundred would put up with it. Of course old Loxton does all he can to make her comfortable, and so he ought, for she could not be fonder of little Hal if she was his own mother, and there are not many girls who would go on, year after year, shut up in an out-of-the-way place like Filbert Farm, not seeing a soul but the child and me and the Vicar.”

Mrs. Sydney was the wife of the Vicar of Paston, and Filbert Farm was just on the outskirts of their parish. Paston is three miles from Carbury, and if you want to go to Filbert Farm, you must turn off the Paston road about a mile after leaving Carbury and take to a very rutty and rough lane that winds gradually up, till it gives up all pretence of being a lane and is just a cart-track across meadows, which in their turn merge gradually into downs.

Filbert Farm is in a hollow, just under the brow of the hill, which rises up behind it steep and rugged. It is a square, stone house, substantially built to withstand the rough winter gales that come howling over the downs, sometimes with great violence, though they mostly pass over the head of Filbert Farm, nestling in its snug hollow. There

are some barns and outbuildings on one side, and an old-fashioned garden with mossy paths and overgrown box edging and tangled borders of hardy perennials. And behind the house, under the hill, are the filbert-trees that give the name to the farm, making a shady walk, with the branches meeting overhead and a dilapidated summer-house at one end, where Hal in summer-time had his lessons.

One end of the house was occupied by an old man and his wife and a couple of shepherd lads, who managed the farm and the big flocks of sheep on the downs. At the other end was a cheerful, good-sized sitting-room, with a bow window and two bedrooms over, comfortably, but quite plainly furnished. It certainly was not, as Mr. Loxton had told Ann, very lively. There was no other house within half a mile, nor even a cottage, and in the winter, when the snow lay deep on the downs and drifted in the narrow lanes, it was pretty well cut off from the rest of the world.

The nearest house was the vicarage, reached by a footpath over the downs, and close to it was the little, old, gray church, while Paston village lay nearly half a mile further on, having apparently in the course of time ebbed away, as if it were tired of the dulness, and were trying to get nearer to civilization and life and bustle and telegraph poles, and had expected the little church to come too; and, finding that she could not leave her dead children on the breezy hill-side, and that half a mile was a long way to walk in hot weather, or winter snow, had set up an ugly, little, red brick

Ebenezer to do instead. Ann always fancied there was a slightly fretful sound in the little church bell, and a frown on its little ivy-covered porch, as if the poor, little mother felt aggrieved at the desertion of her children.

It was certainly a very quiet life for Ann, and many girls could not have endured it, especially with such a tragic, little love-story as Ann carried in her poor, young heart, and with the hungry longing for news of those dear ones of whom she seemed never likely to hear any more; a longing which sometimes grew almost more than she could endure in the long winter nights, when Hal was in bed and the snow lay white all round, and the great stars throbbed and glowed overhead, and the whole world was still, so still as if she had only to whisper to Will and he would hear.

Never a word had reached her in all those years; for it is five years since the day she left Paragon Terrace, and thought and almost hoped the agony of that parting would kill her; but it did not, and such agony very seldom does. Nor is it to be supposed that Ann never knew an hour's happiness during those five years, any more than it is to be believed that anywhere, out of fairy tales, the married couples live happy ever after their wedding-day. I think we are, most of us, rather inclined to overrate the supremacy of the heart in deciding the daily happiness or unhappiness of our lives, though I do not altogether agree with those who set it all down to the liver. I mean to say that, even with a *bonâ-fide* case of heart-break — and there are not half as many

as would appear at first sight — if the sufferer is young and strong, with a little sense and a good digestion, it is impossible that he should always be miserable to the end of the chapter, which should be a matter of sincere thankfulness to himself and his friends and his neighbors.

Do not, however, imagine that because Ann's color came back and the brightness to her eyes and the smile to her lips, and her appetite for bread and butter ; and that, because her laugh was heard ringing through the old farm, and her song sounding blithely in the Filbert walk ; that because she could race with Hal across the down, or climb the steep hill-side like a young goat, she had forgotten Will, or ever could forget.

Sometimes as she lay on the breezy uplands, looking up into the blue sky, or sat on the hill-side, gazing out at the distant channel, where on clear days you could see " the stately ships sail on to their harbor under the hill," Hal would creep up and put his two fat hands in front of those sad, wistful eyes.

" Don't ! " he would say.

" Don't what ? "

" Don't look as if you was reading something up there."

In those early days reading was a very toilsome and uninteresting thing to Hal. When, after great labor both to him and Ann, they had spelt out a line in large print, it seemed a very poor reward for the effort to learn that, " Jane Bunn was a cross girl," or that, " Sam had an ox in a box." If, without further labor, one could know why Jane was cross,

or how Sam managed to get the ox into the box, it might be worth pursuing the subject, but if that was all, *le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*.

So when Grandy, as often happened, brought a picture-book for Hal, the boy would not let Ann read the dull pages of letter-press in between, but would turn from one picture to another and make out the stories that way ; and so when Ann began reading the story of her past in Nature's picture-book, Hal would not leave her in peace, but would turn the pages to another picture, as often as not his own round, little face, which was a picture Ann was nothing loth to contemplate.

Whatever might have been the case with Will, there is no doubt that with Hal it was a case of love at first sight. He was the most devoted little slave that a girl ever had, with the mixture of tyrant that keeps such devotion from becoming contemptible. He left the mill and all his friends there, quadruped and biped, without a murmur, and drove off to Filbert Farm, perched up in the dog-cart between his grandfather and Ann, as good as gold, not even suggesting more than two or three times that he should drive, and giving up the whip directly Ann told him.

“ It's a case of new broom,” said Mrs. Griffith, who could hardly believe her eyes ; but there never had been any such period of successful newness for her, as her struggles with Hal dated from their very first interview. “ She won't stand it long,” prophesied the old woman ; “ when he 's out of his grana-pa's sight, he 'll show what he 's made of, and she

won't find that he's to be ruled by a word, nor by a blow neither."

Mrs. Sydney was of much the same opinion, too, at first, as regards Ann's not standing it very long, when she first noticed Ann and Hal at church, or wandering about the downs and lanes together, and heard that she was the child's governess, and that they were living at Filbert Farm. And when the autumn came on, and the gales blew and the rain fell in torrents, and the path over the downs was almost impassable from the wind, and the lane still more so from the mud, Mrs. Sydney protested against the cruelty of keeping a young thing shut up, with only that child and old Mrs. Curtis, who was deaf and stupid.

But Ann did not mind it a bit. She and Hal would come battling over the hill, buttoned up in their ulsters, with their hats tied down tight over their ears, and come into the vicarage with such bright eyes and cheeks, and hair blown about hither and thither, and so laughing and out of breath, the very reverse of dull or moping. And when the weather grew a little calmer, and Mrs. Sydney could make her way to the Farm, she found such snug rooms and great, blazing fires, and such a lot of occupation and amusements going on ; such painting and carpentering, and cutting out and pasting, such excitement over little things, and interest in everything, that really the vicarage seemed quite dull when she got back there, and the society, to which Filbert Farm was so inaccessible, seemed hardly worth having.

She was a kind, old lady, and she took a great liking to Ann, as many people have done before and since, and she made her and Hal always welcome at the vicarage, and she would have taken them about, and introduced Ann to her friends, if the girl would have consented, but she always held back; neither, fond as she grew of the old lady, did she ever confide in her any of her past history, though Mrs. Sydney was not devoid of curiosity about this girl, who seemed to have no friends in the world; who never wrote letters or received them, who never wished for a holiday, or cared to make new acquaintances.

Only once during those five years did Ann go away from Filbert Farm, and then it was only for a day, when she had been there nearly a year.

When Mrs. Sydney heard that she was going to London, she said to herself that she would not come back, and she reminded the Vicar that she had always said the arrangement would not last long, though she forgot the prophecy on Ann's reappearance next day.

Michael Loxton had similar misgivings when Ann asked if she could be spared. He really knew very little more of Ann at the end of a year than he had done at their first meeting at Paddington. Every week he came up to Filbert Farm, but then Master Hal generally monopolized his attention, and Ann was silent. He could see that Hal was very happy and well, and fond of Ann; that he did not seem to get into mischief, that he was obedient and well-behaved. Ann, too, always looked bright and contented, and gave a good report of her small

pupil's progress, and did not tell tales out of school of idleness and of wilfulness, and occasional tantrums, which, of course, occurred now and then, but always ended in the deepest contrition.

Michael Loxton's time was much taken up with other matters, too ; there was some new machinery introduced that year, and more building, and a law-suit, and it was a great comfort to feel that Hal was all right and well looked after ; and when, one day, Ann asked for this holiday, he began to fear that this quiet, comfortable time was over, and that Ann was tired of her situation.

Ann had had that "reading" look in her eyes very often during those bright Spring days ; every blade of fresh springing grass, every primrose on the bank, or lark singing overhead, brought back waves of recollection, and the longing grew upon her more strongly every day, till she felt as if she must see Will's face once more or die. Only just once, she told herself, if she could catch one glimpse of him, sitting at his old place at the table, or passing along the street on his way to his office, it would be enough, enough to know that he was well ; and she thought that one glance would be enough to tell her he was happy, and then she would feel quite content, as long as the happiness were not the result of having forgotten her.

How strange it seemed to find herself in London again ! What a rush and bustle seemed going on in all directions ! it was quite overwhelming after the quiet of Filbert Farm. How familiar, and yet how strange, the streets looked, and, as she came near

Paragon Terrace, how the old habits and customs of the old life came rushing back into her memory ; the butcher's, where Mrs. Garnett dealt, and the constant grievance over his carelessness ; the hair-dresser's, where Will had his hair cut, and where Mary Anne so greatly admired the ghastly wax head with the elaborately curled hair ; the milk-shop with the chalk cow and Nevill's bread, and a cat asleep in the window (had that cat been sleeping there ever since she left?). Ann hailed them all, one after the other, with the greatest delight.

As she turned the corner from George Street into Paragon Terrace, she could hardly breathe, her heart beat so fast. What if she should meet Mary Anne running to post a letter, or Mrs. Garnett herself on her way to the Berlin-wool shop round the corner, which she frequented so much, or even Will himself, home earlier from his office than usual?

If any such meeting had taken place, I think Michael Loxton's misgivings and Mrs. Sydney's prophecies would have proved true, and Ann would never have gone back to Carbury ; but no such thing came to pass, and Ann pursued her way along Paragon Terrace without meeting any one more interesting than the postman.

She could hardly trust herself to glance at the dear, old house, as she first passed it, but something unfamiliar struck her even then, and she turned before she reached the end of the Terrace and hurried back with eager eyes fixed on something in the parlor window which she had felt rather than seen as she passed before.

“ Apartments to let.”

What did it mean? She stood staring stupidly at the card, till she became aware of a face behind the card looking fiercely at her in return; a regular typical landlady face, like the one in Thackeray’s ‘Rose and the Ring,’ who crushed her impatient, young lodger ruthlessly with, “What are you a hollerin and a bellarin for, young man?”

A boy came up just then to deliver a parcel and the door was opened by a dirty servant girl, as unlike Mary Anne as possible.

Ann stopped the boy as he left the door, though her lips were so dry they could scarcely frame the words: “Does n’t Mrs. Garnett live there?”

“Blessed if I know!” was the answer. “Simpkins was the name as was on the parcel.” And off he went whistling and dragging his stick along the railings.

The servant had kept the door open a crack to hear what was said, and Ann turned to her, repeating her question: “Does n’t Mrs. Garnett live here?”

“Garnett?” said the girl, “never ‘eerd tell of such a name along the Terrace. Now there’s a party by the name of ‘Awkins as lives—”

“Jemimar!” sounded a voice in the passage behind, and the crack of the door closed hastily.

It seemed to Ann like a dream, an ugly nightmare, she could hardly believe her senses; it had never entered her head that any one could go away except herself. She had pictured it all going on exactly the same as usual, only without her; I do not suppose that she really thought that Paragon

Terrace would last for eternity, would be just the same in heaven, but, unconsciously, it was largely mixed up with her ideas of future happiness, and I think that when she thought of death it was very much like passing in at the old, familiar door and being at home again.

She walked away down the terrace so unsteadily that the grim landlady, who had resumed her suspicious watch from behind the card, felt justified in her worst opinion of her. Where had they gone? or were they all dead? The trades-people would know. Ann quickened her pace and took the well-known way to the butcher's. But oh, how soon people are forgotten in this world and their place knows them no more! I would say, if there were not something almost absurd in moralizing in a butcher's shop. There was a new shopman and trade seemed brisker than in old days.

“What can I do for you, Miss?” he asked, dexterously cutting off a shoulder of mutton and slapping it down on the scales. “Mrs. Jones? ah, she's out. Seven, three quarters. Best end of the neck — four and a half — Mrs. Garnett? No; name's not on the books — two kidneys and chump chop for number 70 — by your leave, Miss.” And Ann had to back out of the shop to avoid the carcass of a sheep.

The baker's, that was better, for Mrs. Crump was in the shop and many was the gossip that Ann had had in former days with the old woman; but Mrs. Crump's memory seemed to have grown short and very uncertain, for though she recognized Ann and

greeted her warmly, and said it did her heart good to see her again, it came out after a few minutes that she thought she was a certain Mrs. Joyce, whom Ann remembered as keeping a registry office, and being short and stout, and with a very high complexion.

Another time Ann might have been amused or indignant at this uncomplimentary mistake ; but just now she was too desperately anxious for news of her friends to spare a thought on anything else.

“ Mrs. Garnett ? ah, to be sure, poor thing ! she died — ”

“ Died ? ”

“ No, no ! now I’m mistaking, ’twas the other lady as lived next door, as died when her eighth baby was born, and all for want of proper care and — ”

“ But Mrs. Garnett ? ”

“ Well, let me see ; yes, she’ve gone away, I know, and it must abeen last year or the year before, for we don’t serve no wheres in Paragon Terrace now, as trade is very poor along of all them new-fangled notions of whole-meal and wheat-meal and fiddle-faddles about digestion ; as it seems to me people’s digestions was a deal better when they didn’t think about ‘em so much.”

At the milk-shop Ann learnt that they had left at Michaelmas, but no one could tell where they went ; the green-grocer was inclined to think it was to America, but on being pressed further, only felt sure that some one of the party had either been to or come from “ furrin parts.”

So Ann sorrowfully made her way back to Mrs. Crump's, who had a bedroom to let, where Ann could sleep that night. She went round by Paragon Terrace to have one more farewell look at the dear, old home. How big and empty the world seemed ! how infinitely farther away her friends appeared, now that she could no longer picture their surroundings or their daily comings and goings ; and yet, if she only could have known it, five minutes after she passed along, lingeringly, sorrowfully, Will Garnett came down Paragon Terrace and looked, much as she had done, up at the old house, and if she could have seen his face then, I do not think she would have feared for a moment that he had forgotten her.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PROPOSAL.

THOSE five years have made very little outward difference in Ann, but they have turned Hal from a rosy, roundabout baby to a tall boy of nine, up to Ann's shoulder, and quite strong enough to do what he often threatens — carry her along the filbert walk ; and she has to draw herself up to her full height and look very dignified, to prevent this threat from being carried into execution.

For the last three years Hal had been having lessons with Mr. Sydney, going every morning, and the Vicar declared that his rapid progress was due entirely to Ann's devoted coachings ; for our little, ignorant Ann had kept successfully ahead of Hal, even in Latin and arithmetic, and was prepared to grapple with Greek, so as to help the boy ; and I think some of those who had seen blotted exercises and smeared sums in the old times, would have been astonished at her progress. Not that little Ann was anything approaching a genius, unless you define genius as being “ an infinite capacity for taking pains,” which surely any humble, loving, little soul may lay claim to possessing. To my mind this is a very poor, peddling idea of genius ; it seems to me that real genius has great, strong eagle pinions to carry it up without an effort, far, far above us poor

mortals beating the air with our puny, little wings, that can only, try our hardest, keep us out of the reach of cats.

So Ann was no genius in my sense of the word ; though Mr. Sydney used to say : " My dear, you will be quite a blue stocking, if you go on at this rate ; and what will become of Hal at school when he has not you at his elbow ? "

Yes, Hal was to go to school some day, though neither he nor Ann could bear to think of the time, which would end the close, loving companionship of five years.

" I should like the lad to go to Eton and Christ Church," Mr. Loxton used to say, when he and Mr. Sydney talked over Hal's future, and Mr. Sydney always experienced a slight shock as he heard it, being old-fashioned and conservative and feeling such education was suited alone to the aristocracy, and that a good, sound commercial education was more suitable for the sons of the soil, even if they rose above the national school.

But this was only his opinion in theory, and in practice he was full of ambition for the boy, with his broad forehead and deep-set, intelligent eyes, who was as bright and quick at learning as if his brain had been the legacy of generations of high-born, highly educated ancestors ; and I think the old Vicar made as many plans for Hal's future as Michael Loxton himself did, and leaped over and knocked down ruthlessly all those rigid divisions of class, which in theory were quite impassable.

Mr. Loxton showed but little difference in those

five years, though they had carried him well over the threescore years and ten ; indeed, on the whole, I think he looked younger, and it must have been due to the society of Hal and Ann, for, as the time went on, he came up to Filbert Farm oftener than he used. The little, old house down in the mill grew drearier and dingier year by year ; while old Mrs. Griffith became more cross and grumbling with age and infirmity ; and he grew by degrees to feel sure that there was always a welcome awaiting him at the farm, that he was not in the way and did not interrupt or act as a constraint on them — that there was his chair always ready — in winter in the chimney corner, and in summer in the filbert walk, with Hal ready to perch on the arm and chatter away of all that he and Ann had been doing — of their lessons, of their fun, and of their small adventures.

The young monkey from the very first refused to call her anything but “ Ann ” pure and simple, which she felt was scarcely respectful to his governess, but somehow could not be helped, and she soon got used to it ; and as both Mr. and Mrs. Sydney both soon learned to call her the same, and Mr. Loxton always addressed her as “ Miss Ann,” she hardly heard her surname from one week’s end to another, or even saw it written ; for, as I said, she neither wrote nor received letters, and might well have forgotten that she had any name than “ Ann.”

The cheerful, bright rooms up at Filbert Farm, with Hal and Ann’s ready welcome, were a great

pleasure to the silent, reticent old man, who had had no experience of the sort, all through his long life: both his mother and his brother having been of the same undemonstrative nature as himself, and having all of them taken a grimly matter-of-fact view of everything.

Mrs. Loxton had thought that the two main objects in life were to keep out of debt, and to keep the place clean, and beyond this, there was nothing to signify; and she had had no patience with what she called "fiddle-faddles," and "cockering folks up," and in those early days Michael heartily agreed with her. But now, perhaps, he was getting old, and needed a little "cockering up," for it gave him a warm feeling of pleasure when Hal came running down the hill to meet him, with his curly hair tossing and ruffling in the wind, and dragged him up, clinging to his arm and full of delight at his coming, to where Ann was waiting, sweet and bright and smiling.

He grew to notice the prettiness and comfort, and to be pleased with what he and his mother would have called "fiddle-faddles;" the flowers on the table and little particularities of behavior, and little, courteous ways; he liked to see them in Hal so much that, almost unconsciously, he fell into the way of them himself.

He was so proud of Hal; proud, too, of Hal's affection for him, and that the lad should seek his company, and like to talk to him, and be so open-hearted and natural, and not treat him as if he were too old to understand and sympathize. Why, it

made him feel quite young again — younger, perhaps, than he had even been in his wise, prudent youth.

There is nothing that makes people grow old so fast as always keeping on one line. Dear reader, there are so many pleasant stations on life's line, especially near the beginning, loop-lines and junctions, so why need we keep so rigidly to the express, which stops at none of these? for we shall only have a long, long time to wait at old age, where the country is flat and uninteresting, before we can go on to the terminus.

Michael Loxton, under Hal's and Ann's guidance, resumed the habit of going to church. Mrs. Loxton had been a Presbyterian, and her religious opinions appeared to be concentrated in the strict observance of the Sabbath; and the effect of the extreme tension had been that when she died, Michael and Henry, having dropped the rigid observance of the day, seemed also to have dropped all religion with it.

But when, one Sunday evening in summer, Michael Loxton had happened to be at Filbert Farm, and had walked over the downs with Hal's hand in his, meaning to separate at the church door, somehow he found the child's hand still holding his up the aisle, following Ann to the little seat that seemed just meant for those three; and as Ann long ago had tried to learn Tom's religion, because it was Tom's, and so must be right, so now Michael Loxton was seeking the religion of Hal and Ann, and loved it first because it was theirs.

Those were happy, peaceful days. Yes, even to

Ann, to whom happiness seemed to be a thing hopelessly of the past when she left Paragon Terrace ; but when she wandered over the downs, with her arm resting on Hal's shoulder, or on the neck of his pony, it was something very like happiness and content that smiled back at Hal.

But happiness is so short-lived here ; by the time we have said, "*I am happy*," it is time to say, "*I was happy*." That is the great difference between here and there — here just a drop of happiness enters into us ; there we shall enter into the joy, bathe in it, live in it, breathe in it.

"What will happen about Ann, when Hal goes to school?" Mr. and Mrs. Sydney used to ask each other, and every day that question became more imminent ; for Hal must go to school, if he was ever to carry out Mr. Loxton's programme, and go to Eton and Christ Church.

Ann also asked herself, now and then, the same question ; and once she put it to Hal, who declared that Ann would always live at the Filbert Farm, and that he should come back and spend his holidays with her.

Michael Loxton also debated the same ; but they none of them, except Hal, arrived at any conclusion for a long time.

"Don't you think," Mrs. Sydney said, "that we might have Ann with us? We are growing old, and she would be a great comfort to manage the coal-clubs and the clothing charity."

"I suppose I shall have to find another situation," sighed Ann ; "but, at any rate, I shall have a

reference to give now, so perhaps it will not be so difficult."

But her heart rather failed her at the prospect of a fresh start among strangers.

But Michael Loxton, after many nights spent in deep cogitation, tramping up and down his bedroom to the great irritation of Mrs. Griffith, arrived at a conclusion which will surprise the reader as much as it did Ann.

It was one day in April — a sweet, balmy, young day — a day with petulant, little showers, like the tears of a wilful child, and then bright gleams of sunshine, drawing a dim rainbow on the clouds, and lighting up a thousand mimic rainbows in the rain-drops all round. It was the sort of day that wakes a rainbow of hope, too, even in the cloudiest mind ; and Ann, standing by the gate with a basket of fresh primroses, had her heart full of memories of Will.

Hal was at the vicarage, and Ann was going to meet him, and carry the primroses to Mrs. Sydney, when she saw Mr. Loxton coming up the hill. It was an unusual time for a visit from him ; he was generally busy in the morning, and Ann went forward to meet him, thinking that he might want Hal to go somewhere with him, or had some plan to propose for the afternoon.

She was dimly conscious of something unusual in his manner, that almost might have been nervousness, if such an idea could be associated with the grave, dignified, old man.

" Hal has not come back yet," she said. " I was just going to meet him. He will not be long now."

“I have something I wish to say to you,” Mr. Loxton said, and his voice was so grave that she glanced up at him quickly to see if he were vexed or displeased about anything, and then, reassured, walked on by his side over the downs, waiting to hear what it might be.

He did not seem to be in a hurry to begin, and they had reached the fence of rough-piled stones, from whence you can see Paston church and the vicarage, before he spoke again. He stopped there, and Ann stopped too, watching the vicarage gate, that at any moment might open, and Hal come running and springing out, with a shout of welcome at the sight of her and Grandy.

Mr. Loxton’s mind seemed full of Hal, too, though he was closely examining his thumb-nail instead of watching the gate, for he said:—

“You’re fond of the lad, Miss Ann?”

Fond of him! Of course she was! Since the first moment his arms had clasped her neck, and his sweet, sleeping breath had been warm on her cheek, Ann had loved Hal with all her heart—better, she sometimes fancied, than any one else in the world except one.

“I’ve been thinking a good deal about his going to school,” Mr. Loxton went on. “You will not like to part with him, Miss Ann?”

This, then, was what he had come to say. Ann had known that the time could not be very far off, that it must come sooner or later, that it would be poor love for her boy if she tried to keep him back, or selfishly stood in the way of his improvement; but it

was very hard to make up her mind to it, and to realize that Hal would go away and be just a schoolboy like other schoolboys, and be ashamed of his love for her, or, at any rate, of any display of it, or perhaps more likely forget all about her, for, of course, she would have to find another situation, in all probability far away from the quiet, little farm with the big, fleecy clouds sweeping over it, and the dear, open downs where you could breathe so freely and feel sure that the world was round.

Her mind was so taken up with these thoughts, that she was paying very slight attention to the old man's words, which went slowly on, while he still examined that ribbed thumb-nail of his, as if he were reading what he said from there, when suddenly something caught her ear.

“What?” said Ann.

Now in my childhood I was taught that a plain unadorned “What?” was an inelegant, if not rude, form of speech, and that “I beg your pardon?” (interrogatively pronounced) or, “What did you say?” were forms to be preferred; and I am sure Miss Primmer would have been greatly shocked, if, indeed, anything that Ann did or said could shock that lady. But then Miss Primmer had never suddenly awoke to the fact that a proposal of marriage was being made to her by a suitor of seventy-two, or perhaps even she might have been betrayed into that inelegant exclamation. But no! it is impossible to imagine such a want of refinement in Miss Primmer, or that she could ever be placed in such circumstances as to make it probable.

Yes, Michael Loxton was asking Ann to be his wife, and he went on, though that "What?" of bewildered, terrified astonishment might have been enough answer for any man.

"You're young," he said, "and I'm old, and it's more for Hal's sake than for mine, for you're so fond of the boy, and when I'm gone you would care for him. I've been thinking about it for a long time, and you've no friends, my dear, and I would be good to you, God knows, and tender over you, and when I die—" Oh, what a wooing, with death woven in with it so closely!

Ann's tongue had seemed powerless after that gasping "What?" to utter a sound, but now it found words in a stream.

"Oh, don't, don't!" she cried, holding out her hands as if he had struck her. "You don't really mean it; it can't really be! Oh, say you don't mean it! I couldn't! I never thought of such a thing! Don't be angry—don't be hurt, but I couldn't! Oh, I see now," she said, catching her breath, and laying her hands on his arm in entreaty, "it was only your kindness to me, only because you thought I had no friends and would have to go out into the world again when Hal goes to school. It's so good of you, so good! But don't trouble about me. Mrs. Sydney says she will find a situation easily for me, and, you see, I shall have you as a reference."

The old man was silent, and he had left off studying that thumb-nail, and had raised his eyes to the distant horizon, where the blue channel showed across

the plain. Ann scanned the rugged, ugly, old face eagerly ; there were so many lines there, there surely could be no place for another line of disappointment or pain.

“ That was what you meant ? ” she said pleadingly. “ It was only out of kindness to me ? ”

His eyes travelled back from the horizon down to her earnest face, and he smiled. “ Yes,” he said slowly, “ it must have been what I meant. Never mind, my dear,” — and he patted the hands that rested on his arm with his big, rough, hard-worked hand, and, turning away, went slowly down the hill. How bent he was, how feeble !

But was that really what he meant ? I think not. I think that Michael Loxton loved Ann Nugent with as true a love as others may have done at five-and-twenty. I think, moreover, that he loved her at first sight at the Paddington station, as any ridiculous, sentimental youth of eighteen might have done.

Dear reader, there is something grotesque, is there not, in any old man’s love ? Your eyes follow Michael Loxton down the hill with a sort of amused disgust. But wait a moment. This was his first love, incredible as it may seem, at seventy-two ; that heart he offered Ann had not sighed and palpitated for dozens, fifty years before ; had not been served up on the hymeneal altar two or three times ; had not been skewered through and through with so-called love’s arrows, till St. Sebastian was nothing to it ; was not suffering from moral fatty degeneration ; was, in short, certainly less of an insult to offer a pure girl than many a heart of five-

and-twenty that goes with an unlined brow and undimmed eye.

And have you ever realized that Jacob was seventy when he served seven years for Rachel, "and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her"?

"Why, Ann, Ann, what is it?" cried Hal, ten minutes later, when he found her crouching by the rough wall, with her face hidden in her hands and the primroses for Mrs. Sydney scattered on the ground. "Have you slipped and hurt yourself? I knew you would some day, getting over the wall anyhow without me. Hullo, that's right, you're not kilt intirely." For Ann, though the tears were raining down her cheeks, could not resist a laugh; the notion that she might have been Hal's grandmother, or at any rate his great-aunt, was too much for her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEWS.

IT was the afternoon of the same day, that Ann went over the downs again with her basket of primroses for Mrs. Sydney. She and Hal had picked some more, to make up for those which were spoiled in the morning, and Hal had ridden by her side as far as the boundary wall, to see her safe over this time, and then had ridden off on certain business of his own connected with bird's-nests, while Ann went on down to the little vicarage and along the garden path with the gay edge of crocuses on either side.

Mrs. Sydney spied her from one of the bedroom windows and called to her to go into the drawing-room and wait a minute, and she would soon be down; and Ann, well knowing her way, went into the cheerful, little room, where the sun and fire were having a struggle, and the sun was getting the best of it, and reducing the fire to dull sullenness.

Ann's mind, you may be sure, was very full of that strange interview with Mr. Loxton, and with pity and regret, and the fear that he must have thought her very rude, and abrupt, and perhaps unkind. As she sat in Mrs. Sydney's low chair, with the primrose basket on her knees, and her mind recalling and pondering every word the old man had

said, she kept turning with her foot an envelope that lay on the ground, where, no doubt, it had fluttered from the table in the breeze that came in at the open window.

Mrs. Sydney's minute had been multiplied by ten, and still she did not come, but Ann was not impatient; there was a languor in the soft, spring air and the scent of the primroses, and it was pleasant enough to sit there and rest.

But in one of the turns of the envelope, the direction came uppermost, under Ann's idle eyes, with a strange look of familiarity, and she bent forward to look at it closer, and then, with caught breath and fluttering heart, set down the basket of primroses and took up the envelope, with hands that trembled, and sat looking at the words: "Mrs. Sydney, Paston Vicarage, near Carbury, Somersetshire," written in a square, firm hand.

Did Mrs. Sydney come directly, or was it some hours after, that she came hurrying in, full of apologies for keeping Ann waiting, and full of admiration and thanks for the beautiful primroses, that must be put in water at once to preserve their freshness?

"Come into the next room, my dear, and help me to put them up."

She was so voluble that she did not notice that Ann was silent, with dry lips that could not have framed a single word, and eyes that seemed glued to that scrap of paper, which she had laid down on the table as Mrs. Sydney entered the room.

Now, in any other circumstances, it would have been easy enough for Ann to have drawn Mrs.

Sydney's attention to the envelope, even if she had not asked straight out whose writing it was that seemed so familiar to her; for Mrs. Sydney had no secrets, and was only too pleased with any excuse for pouring out her private affairs to a sympathizing ear; but just because Ann felt as if she would have given ten years of her life to know what that envelope had contained and how it had come to Mrs. Sydney, for she had no manner of doubt as to the writer, so did it seem all the more impossible to ask a question or say a word to lead to the subject.

So she followed Mrs. Sydney into the other room, and patiently arranged the primroses in the glasses for the dinner-table, and did them so well, moreover, that Mrs. Sydney complimented her on her taste, not knowing that it was done purely mechanically, and that it was simple accident that Ann did not put the flowers upside down, with their heads in the water and their stalks in the air; for what was to be expected of her when before her eyes all the time floated the envelope with its square, firm direction?

And all the time Mrs. Sydney was holding forth on the subject of moths and of their ravages on woollen things and furs, and camphor and pepper and other means of circumventing them; and Ann listened as mechanically as she arranged the flowers, and even gave an opinion, now and then, and answered quite sufficiently intelligently to keep the stream of Mrs. Sydney's talk running.

And still never a word of that letter, and Ann's

visit had already lasted beyond its ordinary limits, and Hal would be waiting for her by the fence, and tea would be ready before they reached Filbert Farm, and there was no further excuse for staying, as the primroses were all arranged and the subject of moths almost exhausted ; so Ann got up and took up her empty basket and said "good-bye."

There was not even a chance of going into the drawing-room to take another look, and by this time Ann had begun to doubt if she had seen aright, or had been deceived by a likeness, for Mr. Sydney had taken a clerical friend in there and there was no excuse for intruding on what, no doubt, was a learned discussion.

Ann was already at the door when Mrs. Sydney, in pulling out her handkerchief, pulled out of her pocket a letter along with it, and began : " Well, I declare, I've never told you of a letter I had this morning from an old friend of mine, that I've not heard anything of for years."

Ann was always sympathetic, Mrs. Sydney used to say that was why she liked her so, but on this occasion her sympathy was altogether unusual ; for she was back at Mrs. Sydney's side in a moment and apparently had forgotten all about Hal, and the tea being kept waiting, which had seemed important a minute ago.

The letter Mrs. Sydney held in her hand was not in the same writing as the envelope, but it was one which Ann knew quite as well, though perhaps it was a little more shaky and taily than it was five years ago.

“Yes,” Mrs. Sydney went on, smoothing out the letter, while Ann tried not to look as if she could have wrested it out of its owner’s hand by sheer hard staring: “It must be five or six years, if not more, since I heard from Mrs. Garnett.”

“Mrs. Garnett?” Ann said, with an effort, bringing her voice under control: “I used to know a Mrs. Garnett once a long time ago.”

“With two sons? Living in Paragon Terrace?”
Ann nodded.

“Why, that’s the very same! my old friend, I must often have spoken of her; why did n’t you ever tell me you knew her?”

“You never mentioned her to me,” said Ann.

“Did you know her well?”

“Only a little,” Ann said, “and it was a long time ago.”

“Well, it is certainly a most extraordinary thing, if I never spoke of her, for when she lived here there was no one I saw more of, and the boys were always here in the holidays.”

“Live here?”

“Yes, to be sure, they lived at the house the Masons have now; see there, you can see a corner of it from that window. They were my nearest neighbors.”

Lived here! how small the world is, after all. Yes, of course, they had lived here. Where had her memory been? Mrs. Garnett used to tell long stories of her old home, with names of people and places woven in, and Ann had listened and imagined what it was all like and drawn pictures in her mind,

of course utterly unlike the original, so it was not to be wondered at that so far she had not recognized them. But the names? well, now she came to think of it, many of the names had seemed strangely familiar to her when she first came; but it had never occurred to her mind that when she left home, with all the great, dark, empty universe spread out round that one single little source of light and warmth, with such hundreds and thousands of places to choose from, she could have lighted on one connected in the remotest degree with the dear, old life.

And how was it she had not guessed it, felt it, without the help of that treacherous memory? the paths Will had trodden, the hills he had climbed, and the broad landscapes he had looked on and the copses where he had gathered flowers, perhaps, from the very same plants, where Ann had found them; why was there not a mysterious thrill, a subtle sense to tell her he had been there? What dense, material things human beings must be, since this was possible! And that crooked tree on the downs, twisted and stunted by the winds, there were the initials W. G. cut there, and she had dug them carefully out again, one afternoon, with Hal's knife, taking quite a long time over it, blunting the knife and cutting her finger into the bargain; and, whenever she passed that way, she had always softly traced them with her finger, and all because of the coincidence, as she thought, of some boy having the same initials, Wilfred Green, or Walter Garth, and she never dreamed that Will himself had cut them. She

could have shaken herself for such stupid, gross want of sensibility.

Thoughts and memories were rushing into Ann's mind in such a torrent, that it was difficult to follow what Mrs. Sydney was saying; but Ann would not lose a word, there would be plenty of time to think and remember afterwards.

"Tom and Will were nice boys, mischievous, but then boys always are, and their mother did her best to spoil them. When Mrs. Garnett went to live with them in London, we kept up a regular correspondence for a long time, and once I went to see her, when I was passing through London; but I was busy and I suppose she was busy, and the letters got farther apart, and at last stopped altogether."

"Are they quite well?" Ann asked timidly.

"Oh, yes, quite well," she says. "They've moved from Paragon Terrace some time ago, and live in Westbourne Park. They came into some money, I fancy, from an uncle or some relation, so they could afford a better house, and besides, of course, they wanted a larger house, as they all live together. Ah," said Mrs. Sydney, smiling to herself over some memory of Mrs. Garnett, "she spoilt those boys, and she seems likely to do the same by her grandchildren!"

"Grandchildren?" Ann echoed faintly.

"Yes. Oh, didn't you know Will was married? I'd heard that before, and a very nice girl, who looks after the old lady and makes them all comfortable."

It was rather a hot afternoon and there was a dizziness before Ann's eyes, just then, as if the world

were shaking to its very foundations, and she sat down.

“That’s right, my dear. You’d better stay now and have a cup of tea. I can hear Susan in the pantry, and it will soon be in. You look a little pale, I dare say you’re tired with the walk. Yes,” went on Mrs. Sydney, returning to the subject, “Will has been married some years now; he met his wife abroad, I think, in America, or China, or somewhere.”

“But it was Tom who went to China,” said Ann, and her voice came out so very quietly and indifferently, she wondered at herself.

“Was it? I thought it was Tom who had some disappointment about a girl he was partly engaged to, and was so ill afterwards.”

“Yes, that must have been Tom,” Ann answered, at least that outward part of Ann that was sitting so quietly in Mrs. Sydney’s dining-room, while the real Ann seemed crushed into utter helpless misery, under the blows that kind Mrs. Sydney’s cheerful voice was dealing her quite unconsciously.

“That was some years ago now, and I heard of it through a friend of mine, who lives at Brixton, and she told me how dreadfully anxious it made his mother, and all because of some girl who had behaved badly to him, she said, but I forget what she did. Anyhow, Mrs. Will was the greatest help and comfort to them, and made a capital nurse. And then they moved away from Paragon Terrace, and I heard no more of them till to-day, when Mrs. Garnett wrote, and her letter is as full of little Tom,

as she used to be in old times of his father, and she says she thinks some day she must bring him down to show me."

"Are there any others?" asked Ann.

"Yes, there's a little girl called Ann, like you, my dear, and a baby too; so you see Paragon Terrace would never have held them all. Ah! here's the Vicar and Mr. Parsons. Must you really go, dear? Tea is just coming, and I fancied just now you were not looking well. Well, if you must, I won't try to persuade you. Have you an umbrella, for it looks uncommonly like rain? Good-bye, make haste home before the rain begins."

The bright afternoon had clouded over, nature, for once, seeming in accord with Ann's feelings, from which every particle of spring or sunshine had disappeared. Dark clouds were gathering about the hill tops, and sweeping across the valleys, and gusts of wind blew the rooks all about in the air, hither and thither, and twitched at Ann's hat and tugged at her cloak and buffeted her rudely on the cheeks. It was not at all the sort of day that Ann was used to dislike; it was rather exhilarating to her, sometimes, to battle across the downs against the wind; but it needs a stout heart to do this, and "a sad heart tires in a mile," and Ann had barely reached the crooked thorn-tree when the rain came beating, battering down in great slanting sheets, with an evident uncompromising intention of giving everything and everybody a wetting, whether they would or no.

There was little shelter to be found under the

thorn-tree, it was leafless yet, of course, and the branches were not of any size. Ann would have done better to join the sheep under the stone wall, where they huddled and pushed together; but she hardly felt the soaking rain, or if she did, there was a sort of satisfaction in it, acting perhaps as a kind of counter-irritant to the pain in her heart.

She clung to the tree with both arms and pressed her cheek against the branch where the letters were cut in the bark.

Oh, Will, Will! how soon he had forgotten! or had he really nothing to forget? Had she only been deceiving herself all through? Had his eyes meant nothing? Had it merely been her fancy, when his hands held hers that evening, that his heart had spoken to hers without need of words? Whom had he married? Who was this nice girl, who looks after Mrs. Garnett and makes them all so comfortable? She racked her memory to think of any she had heard him mention; for surely as he married so soon, he must have known her before Ann went. Oh, if only she had known! and yet would it have made any difference? Could she even then have married Tom? Poor, poor Tom! and he really had cared for her, cared so much that he had fallen ill when he found she had gone. Oh, what wicked, cruel ingratitude for his kindness to her! But, oh! the world seemed turned upside down when Will could be faithless, and Tom, jolly, matter-of-fact Tom, ill from love's disappointment!

“Hullo—o—o! Hullo—o—o!” a voice sounded across the downs. Hal had waited tea till he was

tired and then had sallied forth, gaitered and mackintoshed, to find the wanderer, though Mrs. Curtis and his own common sense told him that Ann had certainly stopped to tea at the vicarage and would most likely be reproachful and indignant at his coming out in such a storm.

But it was fortunate he came, for there is no knowing how long Ann would have crouched there, fast getting stupefied with the cold and her own bitter thoughts, and clinging with numb hands to the thorn-tree. Hal hardly recognized the limp, draggled creature, that looked up at him with dull, lifeless eyes, and a white, wan face, as his bright, brisk Ann, with life and spirit and energy enough for a dozen ; but he threw his strong, warm, young arms round her and pulled her up on to her numb feet.

“ Come home, Ann, come home ! ” he said, and with an arm round her, piloted and dragged her down the hill, through the gathering darkness, and landed her triumphantly in front of a roaring fire in the kitchen of Filbert Farm, where Mrs. Curtis took her in hand, and dried her hair, and changed her clothes, and administered warm drinks, and turned her out at last a very fair imitation of the old Ann ; for, though dry clothes and warmth cannot cure a broken heart, you may as well be miserable as comfortably as possible.

CHAPTER XIX.

TROUBLE AT THE MILL.

THE summer that year was of the sort that has been well described as "winter painted green." East wind reigned supreme through April and May, nipping the buds with its cold, old-maid fingers, discouraging the Spring flowers, checking growth, looking sourly on young lambs and ducklings, turning even the genial smiles of that good creature, the sun, into hard, mocking grins. Then when the arrow on the weather-cock had almost got rusted into that everlasting pointing due east, round it went, and on the west wind came riding Jupiter Pluvius to superintend the sodden hayfields and drown the roses, wash the scent out of the mignonette and rot the potatoes and make the wheat grown out and the little green apples fall as hard as what the Carbury boys call "chucktaws." Altogether it was a season when the farmers might have had a right to grumble, if they had not forestalled that privilege by grumbling indifferently through good seasons and bad.

There was east wind and wet weather in Ann's heart, as well as in the outside world, and it was hard work sometimes to keep a bright face for Hal, who seemed, just then, the only comfort left to her in the world, and she would not have him long. At

Michaelmas he was to go to a preparatory school for Eton, and then she must wander away again among strangers, and perhaps never again have Hal's dear, rough head tumbling in her lap, or his firm, apple-cheek pressed against hers, or his honest, loving eyes looking up to hers. She would look into those clear eyes sometimes with almost an agony of doubt. How long would those eyes keep their love for her, when in others it must have died out almost as soon as she was beyond their sight? Or was it love at all or only a pitiful, paltry likeness of it, that a breath of discouragement could blow away?

And sometimes she would try to be proud and resentful. Why should she go crippled and mourning, when Will was happy with his wife and dear little children? If it were not for Tom, she would go back and show how little she cared, and how gay and light-hearted she could be in spite of it all. But Tom, poor Tom! she would get out that old photograph, more faded and dim than when it hung over her bed in Paragon Terrace, and scan it from every point of view, and ponder over and cry over and kiss it, but always with a sort of bewildered wonder as to how it was possible he could have loved her so? She could not even imagine him ill; he had always seemed so strong and full of life and spirits, that to be ill from heart-sickness and trouble of mind, and still more on her account, for the little Ann he had teased and made fun of, and treated with so little ceremony, seemed almost incredible.

Ann's own health was near breaking down that spring. The cold and exposure of that evening on

the downs gave her a bad cold, which she could not shake off, and the east wind did not make her better, or the sleepless nights of thinking and fretting.

Mrs. Sydney grew quite alarmed about the girl, and wanted her to have advice for the cough and feverish hands and bright, big eyes ; but Ann always laughed it off, and declared there was nothing wrong with her and that she would be all right when the wind changed. But when the old lady was gone, she would go to the looking-glass and look narrowly at herself, wondering, with a feeling very nearly hope, if she were going into a consumption and could just die quietly off, without troubling to find another situation and be buried in that peaceful, little churchyard, with Hal and Mrs. Sydney as her mourners, who would come now and then and look at her grave and put some flowers there in summer-time.

It is often the case in books, don't you know ? when the plot is getting too complicated, and the heroine's love-affairs are hopelessly entangled, consumption makes such a pathetic and convenient way out of the difficulty. But in real life it is so different, it comes as often as not when life seems at its brightest and best and freest from complications, and the stern visitor looks terrible enough, among the roses and sunshine, though he may be hailed as fair and gracious by sad souls in the shadows.

But Ann was quite right in what she said to Mrs. Sydney, though she did not herself quite believe or even wish it ; there was nothing seriously wrong with her and she was all right when the wind changed.

She tore up, almost with a sense of disappointment, the touching, little letter she had written to Mrs. Garnett, directed, "to be forwarded after my death," and cried over so often. She had pictured the scene again and again. "Perhaps he will come," she thought, "and stand by my coffin and say, 'Poor little Ann!' Surely his wife need not mind just that! he might say as much for a sister. 'Sister Ann,' as he used to call me. Shall I be so dead, so far away that I shall not know he is near? or will his voice come sounding across the dark river? Surely I shall hear it!"

Michael Loxton did not come as often as before that spring to Filbert Farm, though, as far as Ann was concerned, that strange proposal of his was hardly remembered, having been drowned by the flood of emotions that the following afternoon had brought pouring in on her. Perhaps her manner was a little gentler to the old man, she was more anxious for his comfort and to make him feel welcome, perhaps there was a little more effort and less unconsciousness in her kindness to him. On his side there was not the slightest difference, except that he did not come quite so often to the farm, and this, perhaps, was owing to a press of business or to the bad weather. Now and then he would have Hal down to the mill for a day or two, and Ann's cough was reason enough for her stopping at home, though Hal did not half like to leave her.

"I wish Grandy would have the old house done up a bit," Hal would say, "and made more comfortable. Oh, my bedroom was right enough and

we had a jolly good dinner, I can tell you, but that old Mrs. Griffith is getting past bearing, and does n't even get him a cup of coffee when he has to go off early. And when he comes in tired out, there's just the bread and cheese left out and she's gone off to bed, and she won't let him have a fire. Oh, yes, I know it's July, but I can tell you it's jolly cold and we always have one here in the evening. I told Grandy, Ann, that I thought, when I went to school, he had better have you to take care of him. I said I was sure you would n't mind, and that you knew just how to make a fellow comfortable. But Grandy said he didn't think it would quite do, and I can't see a bit why not."

It was one evening early in August. Heavy rain, as usual that year, was beating against the window, and Hal and Ann were sitting over the fire, in that pleasant half-hour before it is quite dark enough to light the lamp, and set to at lessons for to-morrow.

Michael Loxton had not been up for more than a week, so, when a knock sounded at the door, Ann jumped up and pulled his arm-chair round into the blaze, and despatched Hal flying to get dry slippers and coat, for any one coming up the hill such an evening must needs be drenched.

The idea of his coming through such weather! for she never doubted that it was he, till she heard voices in the passage outside and Hal came back with a face that showed white even in the fire-light.

"There's something the matter," he said;
"Grandy's ill."

Outside in the passage the wind and rain were blowing through the open door, guttering the candle in Mrs. Curtis's hand, as she stood talking to one of the mill-men, who stood outside dripping in the porch.

“What is it?”

“The master's took with a fit or somut,” said the man, and Ann put her arm round Hal, as if she could shield him even from the truth. “Doctor says he maut live through the night, or he maut n't, but anyhow he've sent I for Master Hal, and asking your pardon, Miss,” said the man, “if you did n't mind coming along; there's Mrs. Griffith terribly took to about it, coming so sudden like, and she ain't so young as she was.”

“I'm coming,” said Ann, “of course I'm coming. Hal, put on your mackintosh, I'll be ready in a second.”

“I've abrought a cart up to the gate yonder. I maut abrought a`fly, but I did n't stop to think, but took what came handy.”

In a minute or two Ann and Hal were in the cart, clinging close together, with a horse-cloth over their shoulders and jolting along down the rutty, muddy lanes through the gathering darkness.

On the way Ann gathered a few more particulars. He had seemed all right the day before.

“Leastways he were n't never a one to complain, but me and my mates, we've noticed as he's aged a good bit lately, did n't seem quite the man he was, but lor' bless you! he's a great age, look ye, to be so active; he was as a good a man as many not half

his age, and so were Master Henry. He went into his office last thing at night, as was his way like, and when Dixon went in for to turn down the gas, he was still over his writing and says, says he, 'Let it bide, my man, I'll see to it.' He didn't come in, and Mrs. Griffith being used like to his being late, set his supper and went up to bed, and I'm not for blaming her as some of them do, as the old master never could abear to be fidgeted after like some folks. Well, 't were Dixon as found him, for, when he opens the gate in the morning, the first thing he see was the gas burning in the office, and he chuckles to himself and thinks he've caught the old master out in carelessness at last; but he laughed t' other side of his mouth, I'll be bound! when he opened the door and saw the master hisself, leaning back in his chair, looking —"

"Yes," said Ann, interrupting. any too graphic description for poor Hal's sake; "did he fetch the doctor?"

"Ay, ay, and he raised the whole place in no time. I thought he were gone, and so did most of 'em, and doctor said as 't were a wonder he wern't, as there was n't no knowing how long he'd been setting there. But they took him off and put him to bed and doctor have been in and out pretty near all day, and I will say as Mrs. Griffith have done her best, but, bless you! she's so upset like as she's all of a shake, and doctor says as he'll see for a reg'lar nurse to-morrow, if the old master lasties. Dixon and me's going to sit up along of him to-night."

"Is he conscious!"

"No, he don't seem to know no one, and he only gives a kind of a groan nows and thens. He were a bit more peart when doctor come last and seemed restless like, feeling round for somat and doctor thought as it maut be the lad here, asking your pardon, Master Hal, and he sent me off for him, but, lor! I've seen 'em like that afore, and they often brightens up a bit just afore the end, so I'll not be saying as he won't be gone even afore we gets there."

How long the drive seemed, and, when at last the mill was reached, it looked so black and lifeless, with its great chimneys against the dark sky, that Ann's heart sank as she opened the small door in the big, folding gates, and the watch-dog sprang up with a noisy welcome to her and Hal.

Even at the first glance, you could detect the want of the ruling hand and head that had guided the big concern for so long, that it had almost begun to fancy that it guided and managed itself. There was a shutter flapping and banging loose in the wind, a heap of empty sacks had fallen over, partly across the path, and it had been no one's exact business to pick them up; the gas in the clerk's office was flaring like that in a butcher's shop in the Hackney Road on Saturday night, and two of the younger clerks were fencing with foils that had appeared in some mysterious way for the first time that evening.

Ann's whole heart rose up in wrath at what seemed to her such unutterable baseness, such mean taking advantage of their master's grievous illness; she

could have gone in and shaken those two silly young men, posturing away in what they fondly believed was highly scientific fashion ; shaken them, at any rate, with her indignant words, if not with actual, physical strength. But she was not just to them, nor to the other men, whom she accused of neglecting their work the moment their master's eye was off them. It was not mere eye-service they had given to Michael Loxton, but the suddenness of his illness had set them all out of gear, and it seemed almost unfeeling to settle down to their ordinary work as if nothing had happened ; and as one and another came in, who had not heard the particulars, the men gathered in groups to tell and hear them ; and as sympathy is an exhausting feeling, and the narration of sad facts dry work, a good many drinks were "stood" round, for which it was more convenient to adjourn to the 'Prince of Wales,' opposite the mill-gates, where the men felt it was only their duty to give accurate information to any one who wished to know, and naturally this duty superseded the every-day mill work.

As to those two young clerks, against whom Ann cherished such special indignation, they really felt they were doing a virtuous action. Office hours had been over two hours ago, and they were stopping on to see if they could be of any use, and as the night was damp and chilly and they both of them felt a touch of the blues, being honestly attached to the old man, they had not seen any harm at having a turn with the foils, to pass the time, and warm themselves a bit, and who shall blame them ?

The doctor was just coming out of the house as Ann and Hal entered it, and he turned back with them.

"No worse," he said. "He's such an iron constitution, there's that in his favor."

Hal clung closely to Ann as they went up the narrow stairs. The trouble seemed to have taken all the manliness out of him, and Ann soothed and petted him as if he were the baby-child again, he had been when she first came to Carbury; and at the first sight of the solemnly still form on the bed, and the gray head on the pillows, and the drawn, unconscious face with half-shut eyes, he burst into such hysterical, irrepressible crying, that Ann had to take him outside the door to comfort and quiet and persuade him to go down to the sitting-room below, from whence he soon crept back to sit on the stairs outside, crying and dozing and listening.

When Ann went back into the room, the doctor was raising the sick man's head, and he called Ann to help him shift the pillows, as Mrs. Griffith was so nervous as well as deaf, that she invariably did exactly the opposite to what she was told.

As Ann deftly altered the pillow, the old, gray head rested against her shoulder, so old, so helpless, it called forth a fountain of pitiful tenderness in Ann's heart. There is something so touching in the helplessness of old age, to the young and strong; the weakness and feebleness of childhood, perhaps, appeal more directly to the heart, but yet one is sure that for most infants there is a mother's arm ready to succor it, and a mother's breast to lull its terrors

and troubles to rest, not minding its little tempers or its fretful perversity, and orphans find a mother in every woman worthy of the name. But, oh, dear reader! when we are old and feeble and cross and disagreeable, worn out "beneath the weary and the heavy weight of all this unintelligible world," fretful and unreasonable, how we seem to need a mother then; some one who will not expect us to be wise or sensible or intellectual or even patient or good-tempered, but will love and comfort us all the same, or even all the more, because we are such tired, stupid, old things. I think death sometimes comes with a kind, mother's face to bid such tired children good-night, and I know there is One, greater than death, who has said: "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.

" Speak to him," said the doctor, " I think he is conscious."

And Ann said softly, "Are you better now, dear?" and the old, gray head turned slightly on her arm, and the lips moved in some inarticulate answer.

The doctor left his patient's room quite elated and stumbling over Hal on the stairs, sent him off to bed summarily.

" He's a wonderful, old man, your grandfather, you'll never have half his constitution. We shall have him about again, bless you! in no time, and he'll see many younger men into their graves. And that little governess of yours is a born nurse, and the old gentleman watches her about as if he would n't let her out of his sight. She'll sit up with him to-

night, and two of the men will be handy to help her if he wants lifting, or to fetch me if he's worse ; but I'm not afraid of that, and I'll look in first thing to-morrow. So off to bed with you, boy ; you won't do your grandfather any good by sitting crying here, and it will be only another trouble for Miss Ann if you get laid up."

The old man was very quiet all night ; his eyes, as the doctor said, followed Ann when she moved, and he got restless directly she was out of his sight, but a few words from her always soothed him, and he took his medicine and beef-tea without any difficulty from her hand. He slept at times and sometimes he was so still that Ann bent nearer to listen if he were still breathing ; but in the early morning he began to get very restless, and he seemed trying to say something which his words would not convey. Ann tried to guess what he meant, but without success. It was not Hal, nor his pocket-book, nor his watch, though that seemed nearer the mark than anything else, and at last she called up one of the men, who were very sound asleep in their chairs in the kitchen.

"I can't think what he wants, Dixon," she said ; "he keeps listening, and when I took up his watch he nodded and listened again."

Dixon scratched his head thoughtfully and then bent himself nearly double and gave his corduroy-clad leg a great smack, and opened his cavernous, unshaven mouth, in what threatened to be a roar of merriment, but which, on Ann's hand being lifted in caution, was reduced, by a violent effort, to a chuckle.

"Dash un!" he said, undoing the shutter and letting the morning light fall on the face of the clock; "blessed if he ain't listening for she?" And off he went, chuckling inwardly to himself, leaving Ann in wonder who this "she" might be, for whom Michael Loxton listened, at six o'clock in the morning, and why Dixon was so much amused at the idea.

But a minute afterwards the noisy, cracked, unmusical mill-bell rang out, and as Ann sprang up in horror at such a thoughtless act, which might have waked the Seven Sleepers, and jarred the nerves of any one in the strongest health, she saw a look of satisfaction settle down on Mr. Loxton's face, and when the mill-wheel soon afterwards began and the noisy creaking machinery, that shook the very bedstead where he lay, Michael turned his head on the pillow, as he had not done without help all night, and went quietly off to sleep.

CHAPTER XX.

PROPRIETY.

MICHAEL LOXTON's recovery went on steadily under Ann's care. The doctor was quite proud of his patient, though he was honest enough to own that his recovery was more owing to his splendid, unimpaired constitution, and Ann's excellent nursing, than to any medical treatment.

There were, of course, marks left of that great conflict with death ; the strong, right hand was stiff and could with difficulty hold a pen and trace a laborious signature ; his right foot dragged a little as he walked, and, at first, he was glad of Hal's support on one side and Ann's on the other, even to cross the room. There was a difficulty, also, sometimes in remembering the right word he wanted, but otherwise his mind was quite clear, though not perhaps so brisk and active as it had been before, and his eyes had lost some of their keenness and his mouth its firm decision ; but, by the end of a month, strangers, and those who did not know Michael Loxton well, might have hardly noticed there was anything wrong with him.

But Ann could have told that he still wanted a great deal of care. She and Hal had never gone back to Filbert Farm since that night, though Hal went daily over to Paston to his lessons at the vicar-

age. Under Ann's rule, the little, dull mill house assumed a brighter and more home-like and comfortable appearance than it had ever done before. She made a bold attack, even on that best parlor of old Mrs. Loxton's, and worked such havoc in its stiff and mouldy splendors, that I wonder the old lady did not rise from her grave in horror at the profane hands laid on her household gods, who were turned out neck and crop, along with the smell of damp and the shut-up closeness of years. Fresh air was invited in at the open window, bountiful fires roared up the chimney, where the starlings had had it all their own way for generations ; the small, rigid, horse-hair sofa, which, uncompromisingly, promised back-ache and neck dislocation to intending visitors, was exchanged for another, old-fashioned still, but of a happier period, when large, roomy sofas, with high, well-stuffed back and ends, and plenty of cushions, were appreciated, as they still are by discriminating people ; and the penitential chairs and the arm-chairs which Hal, learned in the Tower of London lore, declared to be identical with a torture known as "the little ease," were banished and their places taken by less austere pieces of furniture, and especially by one large easy-chair, just meant for long limbs and a weary old back. Fresh flowers replaced the fusty, dried grasses and spectral skeleton flowers, which always seem such a dreary style of ornament and make one wonder why we do not proceed to decorate our rooms with the skeletons of animals, while we are about it.

Ann hesitated over some of the pictures, hideous

daguerreotypes and dingy photographs of exceptionally plain people. Ugly as they were, they might have associations, and one day she made Michael Loxton tell her who they all were, and as they all seemed distant cousins or friends of his mother's, of whom he knew little and cared less, she asked him to give them all to her, and she and Hal carried them away, one day, up on to the downs and dug a hole and buried the poor, faded, ugly, forgotten things under the thymy turf, and Hal made a cross over them of white pebbles, to mark the spot; and they came back cheerfully, with the prettiest of the water-colors and chromo-lithographs from Filbert Farm, to take their places, and a photograph of Hal on his pony.

It was wonderful what a difference there was in that dull, little house; how cheerful and home-like it was of an evening, with Mr. Loxton resting in the big arm-chair, with Ann close by sitting at work by the shaded lamp, or reading out some book, chosen as was supposed for Hal's amusement, but really to please and interest the old man, who had had no time all his life for reading or listening to tales, and now got as interested and excited as a boy over the stories of adventures with smugglers or pirates, and was not half as critical as Hal over the probability or improbability of the plots, having, perhaps, lived long enough to know that truth is stranger than the wildest fiction.

And sometimes Hal and Ann would sing, and for his sake, and because the poor, stiff, right hand would beat time to the lilt and ring of the old Irish

airs, Ann furbished up all her old repertory, that she had well-nigh forgotten, since the days when she had delighted the girls at Laburnam Villa, and shocked Miss Primmer by her loud performance of them over her linen-mending.

And Hal and his grandfather would have long games of cribbage, with Ann to mark for them, and once or twice they tried three-handed whist, but found it rather too exciting.

The old man was soon tired, though his hours in the office were very much curtailed, both at the beginning and end of the day, and often interrupted by inroads from Ann, on one excuse and another; sometimes to bring him a cup of tea or some jelly or some other little nicety; for the lamp of life needs a good deal of feeding and tending when the flame has been so nearly extinguished by the chill breath; sometimes it was to write a few letters from his dictation, or to read some of the paper to him, and, strange to say, it was generally the money article that she turned to first for his amusement, and she was able to read it quite intelligibly to him, even if she did not arrive at much interest in it herself; and sometimes she only came in for a chat, or to persuade him to come out for a walk on the sunny side of the mill, up and down, with his arm resting on her shoulder.

Now and then, when the weather was fine, they would go for a drive in an old and comfortable, but not very elegant four-wheel, with a peaceful, old pony, whom Ann could drive with perfect safety, even with her limited knowledge of driving.

Those September days were very pleasant. The weather seemed trying to make amends for the cold spring and wet summer, by a bright and cheerful autumn. It was too late to save the harvest, and these tardy smiles may have been almost exasperating to the farmers ; but they were very pleasant to other people, and trees and hedges tricked themselves out in all manner of bright colors, and there was more sunshine in the golden horse-chestnuts and ruddy beeches, than that fickle god, Phœbus, had vouchsafed to his poor English worshippers through the summer.

I do not know which of the three was the happiest. The old man enjoyed it all with a simple pleasure that was quite pathetic, and that would fill Ann's eyes with tears, while Ann herself had recovered more of her old spirits than had seemed possible in that time of east wind and inward sorrow ; but it is a fine receipt for curing a broken heart to have no time to think of it, and to be obliged to keep up a bright exterior for the sake of others, and after a time the brightness penetrates below the surface, and when you have time to think of your own troubles, you find the heart, if not exactly mended, still not quite so hopelessly crushed and mangled as it seemed at first.

As for Hal, he was in high satisfaction, and clattered in and out of Carbury every day on his pony, getting through his lessons as quickly as possible, and always coming back in a tremendous hurry, as he was really able to be of considerable use to his grandfather in the business in various ways, and

was mightily proud and important over any achievements of the kind. He even consulted Ann seriously as to whether it would not be better for him to give up any further schooling, and take to the Mill regularly ; and Ann had some difficulty in persuading him, that it would not quite do to have finished his schooling at ten, and that his grandfather had set his heart on his going to Eton and Oxford.

She would only have been too glad to agree with him, as his going to school was coming very near now, and it would break up the pleasant home-circle at the Mill, and oblige her to seek another situation, and leave the old man solitary ; and though he was wonderfully better, he certainly was not fit to be left to himself, even though by Ann's management Mrs. Griffith had been replaced by a more competent housekeeper, who would look after him better, and not allow everything to fall into the wretched condition it had been in before.

Why should she not stay ? It cut her to the heart when his eyes followed her about the room, or brightened at her return, or when she heard how he had missed her when she had been away, even for an hour, and found him dull and depressed, and with the numb aching in his hand, which only Ann's patient rubbing seemed to soothe and quiet.

“ Why should I leave him ? ” she asked herself. “ There is no one to take my place, and I have nowhere to go. I have done so little but harm all my life, that I might as well do a little good while I can, and I can be of good to him.”

Hal was to go to school on the fifth of October, and September was nearly at an end, and yet Ann's plans were undecided. Mr. Loxton never spoke of them, and Ann fancied he purposely avoided the subject, and would not influence her one way or the other, but she was sure it was often in his thoughts. As for Hal, he took it quite for granted she would stay, and had already planned what they would do in the Christmas holidays. Why on earth should she go away? Whatever would Grandy do without her? Or, more convincing argument still, "What would I do without you in the holidays, Ann?"

But one afternoon Mrs. Sydney came down to the Mill. It wanted but a few days to Michaelmas, and Hal had gone up to Filbert Farm to select one of the noble fleet of geese on the pond there, to celebrate the festival, and, I am afraid, to assist in its slaughter, and so Ann was alone, and was busy marking Hal's linen which was all ready for school. She did not disdain marking-ink now, as she had done on a former occasion, which seemed centuries ago now.

Mrs. Sydney was troubled and worried in her mind. Ann could see that, the moment she came in, and she wondered what had befallen, and if the dissenters had been more aggressive than usual, or the old women more grasping and hypocritical, or whether the cook had given warning, or the Vicar had a touch of sciatica. But it was neither of these afflictions, but one really more serious to the kind, old lady.

It was some time before it came out, and Ann had

got her a cup of tea, and the peculiar sort of bread and butter which she liked (a Coburg loaf, reader, not too new, in case you are thinking of inviting Mrs. Sydney), and had told her a good deal about Hal's clothes and other preparations, and consulted as to whether she might send a hamper of good things with him, before Mrs. Sydney broached the subject that sat so heavily on her mind.

“What day does Hal go?”

“On the fifth.”

“And what are you going to do then, Ann? Of course you can't go on staying here. You had better come to us.”

“Can't I stay here?” asked Ann. “Mr. Loxton is very ailing sometimes still.”

“Yes, yes; but you must think of yourself. I have been looking through the advertisements of the *Guardian*, and I've cut out one or two that I thought might do, and I think, if you can give me a pen and ink, we might draw up an advertisement to go in next week, or perhaps the *Morning Post* might be better, and of course you can stop with us till the arrangements are settled.”

Ann's breath was quite taken away by the sudden urgency that seemed to have arisen, and Mrs. Sydney herself was evidently in a nervous state of fluster.

Ann brought the ink, and sat by patiently, while Mrs. Sydney composed a telling advertisement, in concise language, so as not to exceed the number of words allowed for the lowest charge, as I have so often noticed people, even in the greatest mental

anguish, fidget over the wording of a telegram to keep the shilling limit and lose really important time in so doing.

Ann also looked listlessly over the advertisements Mrs. Sydney had cut out, but with so little interest, that the good lady turned on her at last with something as near exasperation as her good nature would allow.

“Why, Ann, you don’t seem to consider that there is no time to be lost, for Hal will be gone in less than a fortnight, Tuesday week, and here we are at Thursday.”

“Why should I be in such a hurry to go?” Ann asked. “I should not like to leave Mr. Loxton till he is stronger.”

“Oh, my dear!” Mrs. Sydney said, laying down the pen and taking Ann’s hands in hers; “you don’t know, you don’t understand what a wicked world it is, and how people talk. Oh, Ann! it seems ridiculous; it’s never crossed your mind, nor would it mine, that there could be anything to talk of in your living here with an old man like Mr. Loxton; an old man, as you may say, with one foot in the grave, old enough to be your grandfather, who, no doubt, thinks of you just like a granddaughter. I feel ashamed even to put such a notion into your head!” And indeed the old lady’s face was flushed and her eyes sank away from meeting Ann’s, which were gazing at her with a strange startled look of inquiry. “But I’m so fond of you, child, as fond of you as if you were my own daughter, and I can’t bear to hear a word against you.”

"I don't understand," Ann said slowly; "what is it they say?"

"That it's not right for a young girl like you to be all alone here with Mr. Loxton! Oh, my dear! I know it's all nonsense, but what can one do? a girl's character is such a precious thing, if it once gets blown on, she never gets over it, and sometimes it goes against her all her life."

"But he's so old," Ann went on, with a little choke in her voice; "and he has been so ill and so good to me—and he'll be so lonely."

Mrs. Sidney had to strangle a sympathetic choke before she could answer. "Yes, but you must think of yourself, as well, you see, my dear. He's not like a poor man, I've heard that Michael Loxton might buy up half the county if he had the mind, and, of course, with money you can get every comfort and alleviation for sickness and old age."

"Yes," said Ann doubtfully, for it had been borne in on her so much lately, how little Michael Loxton's money had done for him, or seemed able to do.

"The Vicar came home yesterday in a terrible state of mind," Mrs. Sydney went on. She felt she was making way with Ann. That last "yes" might be taken as assent so far. "He had been in to a clerical meeting at the rural dean's, and three of the clergy, there, I won't mention their names, came up separately and asked him how Mr. Loxton was, and then went on to inquire about you, and to say that it was rather a curious position for a young girl, and they heard reports that it was not quite respectable."

But Mrs. Sydney had gone too far now. Ann had taken it all so quietly hitherto, that Mrs. Sydney was not prepared for the sudden jerk with which Ann's hands were drawn from her grasp, nor for the rush of indignant color into the girl's face and the blaze of her eyes, as she stood up, looking quite tall and stately, this little Ann of ours.

"And why should I mind?" she said, "what a set of evil-minded, gossiping, old men say of me?"

"Oh, my dear!" gasped Mrs. Sydney, horror-struck at such profanity; "it was a clerical meeting."

She began pinning on her shawl with trembling hands, while Ann stood with her back turned, gazing out of the window into the gathering dusk, with her small hands clenched and working to keep down the passion of words that could hardly be repressed.

But when Mrs. Sydney was ready to go, Ann turned and put her arms round her kind, old friend, and laid one burning check against the wrinkled one that was damp with tears.

"Forgive me," she said, "forgive me, I was wrong and rude. I must think a little. It is all so difficult."

She walked with Mrs. Sydney to the outside gate, affectionately fussing about her wraps and the tying of her veil, and fearing she would have a dark walk and be tired, and then when she had closed the gate after her, turned back and crossed the cobble stones of the yard to the office window.

The blind was not down and Ann could see into the room. The old man was sitting in the arm-chair by the hearth, where the fire had sunk to a

dull, ashy glow. The early, misty, September dusk was closing in so fast that most of the light in the room came from the fire, dull as it was, and by it she could see the old, gray head leaning forward, with the chin on his breast, with a look of depression and patient weariness that spoke volumes to the spectator, and she could see the poor, right arm and the stiffly held hand whose cunning was gone. There could hardly have been a more pathetic picture of loneliness than the old man, sitting there in the dark room, with the dull embers dropping into dead, white ashes ; the sort of picture that Ann could no more have carried in her memory into brighter and more cheerful scenes, with the feeling that it was being re-enacted, than she could have flown.

“ How can I leave him ? It is impossible.”

CHAPTER XXI.

MEETING AGAIN.

THERE is a sort of feeling which the Scotch have named being “fey,” a kind of wild exhilaration, an unreasonable, causeless, high spirits, which they say invariably precedes some dire calamity to the person so feeling. I think I have seen and felt something of the sort myself, though no doubt we are apt to exaggerate such things, in retrospection; for when a sudden shadow falls, the little bit of sunny road, before you come to it, looks all the sunnier, as you glance back, and if no trouble follows these gay moments, we forget to call them “fey,” as we forget dream after dream that seem full of portentous meaning, and wonder and talk and found theories on the one in a thousand that is a little near the truth.

But I think Ann was “fey” that morning, when she walked over the downs in the warm September sunshine. She had not felt so light-hearted for months, I might almost say years, she felt so well, so young, so strong. The slight crispness in the air seemed quite intoxicating. She lingered to pick blackberries in the hedges, she gathered a bunch of glowing red and yellow leaves and scarlet berries; she even chased a rabbit that sat on his haunches combing his whiskers and looking at her with too

great assurance ; she coaxed the sheep on the downs to come after her, with a piece of salt. The landscape had never looked so fair, though she had seen it under every variety of light and season. The great banks of trees below were splendid in their rich tints, the country beyond was a pleasant patch-work of green meadows and golden stubble fields, to which the ploughed lands contributed a nice, rich, ruddy brown. The channel beyond was so distinct that it seemed as if a short walk might bring you to its shores, while beyond, the Welsh hills showed in soft cloudy indigo.

Ann was on her way to the vicarage. Her conscience had accused her of having been irritable and sharp with Mrs. Sydney the evening before, and of having sent the kind, old friend home wounded and unhappy, and besides she had something to tell her that she must be the very first person to know, and when she thought of this, the girl sobered suddenly and a grave look came into her face. “ How could I leave him ? ” she asked herself, “ and they would not let me take care of him just as a daughter, so I must needs be his wife.”

She had no regret, no misgivings, no fear just then. It seemed so simple, so plain before her. She had grown so fond of the old man, not of course with the love of a wife for a husband, but that was all gone by for her now, and she could hardly, short of that, feel greater affection than she did for Michael Loxton, and she would care for him and nurse him and be very tender to him, and the years that yet remained to him, and God grant they might yet be many, should

be very bright and happy, if it was in her power to make them so. They were to go away to some warm, sunny, seaside place, and every moment and every thought of her heart should be given to his comfort and happiness. He had been so tired and worn out the evening before, too much so to enter into any plans for the future, only it seemed such a comfort to him that she would not go away, for inwardly he had been fretting and worrying with the idea that he should be left to his old, solitary, dreary life, all the worse for having learnt the pleasure of young cheerful company and loving care.

“I ought not to let you do it, child,” he said, “but it will not be for very long.”

“I know I can make him happy,” Ann told herself. There was almost a motherly feeling in the girl’s heart to the old man, nearly the same as she felt for Hal.

“It is only right that I should make some one happy, as I was the cause of such unhappiness to Tom, poor, old Tom; and to Will, yes, surely he was unhappy then, though he seems to have got over it so soon.”

It was a serious step that she had taken. Under the happiest circumstances, girls are full of grave thought when they are first promised in marriage; there are generally a good many tears, anxious looking into the future, little, regretful glances back at careless, free girlhood, and with Ann there seemed a hundred times more reason for sad and serious thought. And yet, as I have said, her spirits had never seemed so light nor her heart so free from care

for the future or regret for the past, so, as there is no explaining it, I think she must have been "fey."

Hal was in attendance on Mr. Loxton, and was to take him for a drive to a farm some miles from Carbury, and Ann had seen the start, and had bid them not wait dinner for her on their return, as if Mrs. Sydney asked her to stay, she should like to do so. She had watched them down the street from the mill, to be sure that Hal turned the corner carefully, and she had laughingly called them her two boys, and had told herself she was growing a shocking, old fidget, and then she had set off for her walk.

It was twelve o'clock before she came in sight of the vicarage, she had not come very directly, she had loitered on the way, as I have said, to pick blackberries and to admire the landscape. Perhaps, deep down in her heart, she was a little bit nervous at the idea of telling Mrs. Sydney, and not sorry to delay the moment of doing so; but when she came over the hill, and saw there was some stranger in the vicarage garden, she regretted that she had not come more directly, so as to make sure of finding no visitors there.

It was only, however, a nurse and a little boy, busy under the horse-chestnut tree, which was scattering the lawn with its golden leaves, finding the big, spiky fruit, and cracking them to pick out the rich, red-brown chestnuts inside. It was just what Hal used to delight in when Ann first came, and they had threaded strings on strings of horse-chestnuts to adorn the summer-house, but had found them

disappointing when the glossy polish had faded, and the shells were wrinkled and dull. But still Ann could sympathize in the satisfaction of stamping the outer husk open with your heel, and picking out the nuts ; and she stopped in the path to watch the process, and even pointed out one that had fallen under a laurel, and escaped the child's notice.

" I suppose," she thought, " the child's belongings are indoors, and I may not get a chance of a minute alone with Mrs. Sydney, if they have come to spend the day."

But even as she thought this, Mrs. Sydney came out through the drawing-room window to meet her and bring her in that way.

" My dear," she said, " I am so glad you have come ; I have had no rest all night, thinking of you, and if I had not had visitors, I meant to have come down again to-day."

They were close to the drawing-room window, and Ann felt that she must seize that moment for telling her news, as she might not get another alone with her, and she stopped Mrs. Sydney, laying both her hands caressingly on the old lady's arm. She had so many pretty, gentle ways, had little Ann, and she was so unconscious, too, and never did anything for effect or else, perhaps, she might have guessed what a pretty picture she made, to any one looking from the drawing-room window, as she stood in the bright September sunshine, with the soft color mantling on her cheeks, and her hair a little ruffled by the down breezes, with her eager lips and sweet, deprecating eyes, and the big bunch of colored leaves and berries

in the hand resting on Mrs. Sydney's arm. "A sight for sore eyes," an old woman had once called Ann.

"Wait a minute," she said; she was gasping a little, it was not easy now it came to the point to bring it out. "I wanted to tell you something. I want to thank you for all your kindness in thinking for me, but I shall not want another situation, I am going to marry Mr. Loxton when he is better."

"Marry! Mr. Loxton!!" No print is big enough, or notes of exclamation numerous enough to express the surprise and horror of Mrs. Sydney's voice; it rose to such a shrill pitch that it must have been plainly audible to any one in the drawing-room, even if Ann's own words had not penetrated there already. "Marry an old man like that! half in his grave! old enough to be your grandfather! Oh, Ann, child, you must not do it! I can't allow it! it must be prevented. I will go and see Mr. Loxton myself, or the Vicar shall."

She was preparing to hurry off, she hardly knew where, to prevent this terrible thing, but Ann's hand detained her.

"Dear, kind, old friend," she said; "there is nothing so dreadful in it. It is quite my own free will. I couldn't go away and leave him, and besides, don't you see? I had nowhere to go, and now I shall have a home, yes, and a very happy one, too," the girl said loyally. "He has always been good and kind to me, and I love and respect him with all my heart."

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" Mrs. Sydney went on,

"I never dreamt of such a thing! I wish the Vicar were at home! What will he say?"

"We shall be married as soon as possible," Ann said, trying to calm the old lady's agitation, by putting it in a very quiet, matter-of-fact way, "and go away to some warm place, the doctor thinks the south of France, but we must not go too far from Hal."

"And what do you think the world will say?"

"I don't know," Ann answered, a little wearily, "and I don't much care. I think I heard enough of that yesterday; but I want *you* to say 'God bless you,' and to wish me happiness, and the world may say what it pleases."

"They will say you did it for his money. Oh, Ann, my child, I know you too well to think that for a moment, but I do think it may be for a home, and I have told you times and times that as long as I and the Vicar live there is a home for you here. Oh, child, think better of it! Trust it to the Vicar to get you out of it. Michael Loxton will not hold you to your word, he's a good, old man, and he won't be hard, and there's always a home for you here, child, so do not let that influence you."

"It was not that," Ann said. "I have not done it without thinking. Won't you even say you wish me happiness?"

And then the girl put her arm round her old friend's neck, and stopped further protestations with a kiss, and, knowing that they could not well be renewed in the presence of others, drew her gently towards the drawing-room window, and followed her in — into the presence of Will Garnett.

If there had been a moment's preparation, if she had had time to collect herself, and to remember how much she had suffered while he had forgotten so soon, to remember dignified phrases she had composed when she pictured imaginary meetings, to have feigned the indifference she could never have felt; but it was too sudden for any of this, and after the first startled glance of recognition, Ann stood behind Mrs. Sydney, with her eyes fixed on the bunch of leaves in her hand, and her heart beating tumultuously, and with such a surging and singing in her ears that made the voices sound far away and thin and strange.

Mrs. Sydney, herself, was too perturbed to notice anything peculiar in Ann's behavior, and had she done so, it would only have seemed natural that the girl should be *distracte* and absorbed with her own personal affairs.

Ann heard Mrs. Sydney begin a confused sort of introduction, and then Will's voice (was it just the same as in the old days, or was there a slight hardness and constraint in the tone, and a sharpness as of pain? or was she fanciful?) saying, "I do not think we are quite strangers."

"Oh, no, to be sure!" Mrs. Sydney interrupted, "Ann said she had known your mother, slightly, long ago. Ann, this is Mr. Garnett, I suppose I must call him that now, though in old days it used to be Will."

And then Ann's hand was in Will's again, and, at the touch, a thrill ran through every nerve, though his hand was cold, and there was no friendly press-

ure or lingering hold as she remembered long ago. She would have given worlds to raise those leaden eyelids and look into his face, but she had not the strength, and her hand fell back nerveless at her side, and she tried to say something, but no words would come, and she listened for a minute to Mrs. Sydney and Will talking of his name, and why she should not still call him Will, and of memories of boyish tricks, and of the tin of biscuits Mrs. Sydney had kept on purpose for the boys.

Then, at a pause, Ann managed to bring out a sentence she had been repeating over and over again inwardly, till the words seemed to have lost all connected meaning, and to sound like a list of words out of a spelling-book, when they came out in rather a strange, strained tone: —

“ I hope your mother is well? ”

The question seemed addressed to the bunch of berries she was examining, but Will answered, “ Thanks, she keeps pretty fairly well, though she has to be careful of taking cold, as she has a tendency to bronchitis as, perhaps, you remember.”

“ And your brother? ” (Ah, poor Tom !)

“ Yes, Tom is wonderfully well, getting quite stout.” There was an increase of cheerfulness in Will’s tone that Ann resented. It was not romantic to get stout, but Tom’s feelings were far deeper than some who, perhaps, might look more outwardly heroic.

“ And — and Mrs. Garnett? ” She could not say “ your wife.” Oh, to have seen his face then !

But his voice took a softer tone, Ann’s jealous ear

noted, as he answered, "Thank you, she is not very strong, but we hope the sea air will set her up. She is at Weymouth now, and that is how it is I have run over to see our old home and to show Mrs. Sydney the boy."

Just then a servant came to call Mrs. Sydney away on some domestic matters, and Ann and Will were left alone together. They were both still standing by the open window, through which Ann had come in the warm sunshine, a bee was buzzing on the window-pane, and, outside, the rooks were cawing round the golden elm-trees; and those sounds always bring back to Will and Ann the memory of that moment of bitter pain, when they stood silent side by side, so near and yet with such a gulf between them.

It was Will who first broke that silence, and his voice was shaking with an emotion which he could not entirely control as he spoke.

"Ann," he said, "I could not help overhearing what you said to Mrs. Sydney at the window. Will you let me, for the sake of those old days long ago, when, as you say, you knew us slightly, wish you every blessing and happiness? God bless you, little Ann!"

Again his hand held hers, and she noticed how his shook, and how it closed on hers with a pressure that seemed full of question, of entreaty, of reproach, and she felt that hers lay limp and chill and unresponsive, though most likely it was for the last time.

"Thank you," she heard her voice saying, "Good-bye."

And then she was crossing the composed way, and then the between her and Will, her and his hope, and she was in the little caught quickly at the banisters, giddiness had struck her, and fallen.

What right had he to speak in tone, when the pain and the suffe had been all hers, and he had it? Why had she not had the spirit to him and show him she did not care

Just then Mrs. Sydney came out. "Why, Ann," she said, "you can't stop and have dinner, with Will Garnett. And besides, dear, so much to say to you."

"Not to-day, dear Mrs. Sydney, well, my head aches. I will come perhaps to-morrow, when you are good deal to think of, you know, stupid company if I stay to-day."

So the old lady unwillingly let her after her before she was half across.

"Wait a bit, Ann, you must see he's such a beauty. No wonder he is so proud of him. Here, Tom, Tom, to this lady, there's a man."

The child left his chestnuts and came across the grass; a lit shouldered figure, in a sailor's ~~brimmed~~ brimmed hat pushed back, and

cut square on his forehead, and a face the very counterpart of Will's, with radiant eyes looking up at Ann.

Those eyes were too like Will's for Ann to bear their gaze with composure, and she stooped and kissed the child and turned away.

"How like he is to his father," she said.

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Sydney answered her. "Well, it seems to me that he is the image of his uncle Will."

"Uncle?"

"Yes, this is Tom's eldest boy. Will is not married yet."

"But you said —"

"Yes, I know, I got confused over the names. It was Tom who went to China, and he married this lady on his way home. They were travelling together in the same party, it appears, and he had known her before at Shanghai, and so they were married at New York, and he never told his mother anything about it till he got to England, and then she only got the letter the very morning of the day he brought his wife home."

Did Ann remember that letter that she had kissed, and covered with her tears in the early morning of the day she left Paragon Terrace?

"Oh, yes! Will's been telling me all about it, but he does n't say much about his own illness just afterwards, though I know I heard it was from some disappointment. I don't think he likes to be asked about it, for he kept turning the subject when I began speaking of it. Well, good-bye, my dear,

I think you might have stayed to dinner, but I shall make the Vicar drive me down to-morrow."

"Very well," said Ann with a smile, "I shall expect you."

And then she walked away up the road, stopping at the turn to wave her hand to her old friend, who still stood with little Tom at the gate, and then she set off briskly up the path to the downs, with the smile still on her lips.

There is, they say, a muscular movement sometimes after death, that gives a ghastly aspect of life to a corpse, and so it is sometimes with the little outward forms and *convenances* of life, they last when the heart, that is supposed to originate them, is cold and dead to all feeling.

CHAPTER XXII.

GOOD-BYE.

you know, reader, on some autumn mornings, hedgerows and banks, bushes and meadows, are decked in dainty gossamer webs, every web gilded and jewelled with tiny drops of dew? Naturalists tell us that this is all the work of minute spiders, and, of course, we ignorant mortals are led to receive, without question, the assertions of science; but, if one were disposed to be sceptical, might ask where this mighty army of spiders came from, for there was not a sign of all this airy webbing the evening before, nor were spiders to be seen preparing for operations. Why, too, do they choose one day more than another for such a demonstration? And if it is done with the intention of providing food for themselves, how do the poor spiders exist all the rest of the year? And again, if you have ever watched a spider spinning his web, you will know that it is not a rapid process by any means, but it is done with great deliberation, so what can the toil be of clothing miles of hedge? No, I say, on the whole, it is easier to believe, as the people do, that the fairies have been at work.

She was sitting by a bank on which the remains of the fairies' handiwork still lingered, though it was mid-day. She hardly knew how she had got

there, for she had turned off the path across the downs, and had wandered aimlessly hither and thither without thinking where she went. Indeed she seemed fighting against thought, beating off desperately the sharp arrow that Mrs. Sydney had so unconsciously winged at the very life of her favorite ; but this was not to be done for very long, and when Ann had reached the bank, where a tangle of blackberries and brier made a rough, little bit of covert, she fell at full length on the damp, long grass, like one stricken to the heart, with a cry, “Oh, Will, Will ! why did n’t you come before ?”

If he had only come one day sooner she would have been free to put her hand in his. Oh, fool, fool that she had been, to believe that he could be false and forget her so soon ! when she knew that it was not in Will’s nature to be false ; the sun itself might fall out of its place, or the earth be swallowed up, before such love as his could change or falter, and yet she had believed an old woman’s confused story—an old woman who muddled up facts that occurred even yesterday, and put one name for another every five minutes ; who invariably called the housemaid by the cook’s name and the cook by the housemaid’s, who called George Giles, William Jones, and Mary Blake, Jane Booth, a dozen times a day. And she had wondered so, even while she believed, at Tom’s falling ill, as if that were half as improbable as Will’s proving fickle. And Will ? Why, he was looking ill before she left, when he came back from Devonshire—he was thin and worn and hollow-eyed. And how was he looking now ? She had not

had one good look at his face. Those stupid eyes of hers had not ventured to meet his, but she fancied from that first hasty glance that he was not looking well; and surely the hand that had held hers twice was thinner than it used to be? And she had resented the sound of pain and reproach in his voice, thinking he had no right to it, and that it was she alone who should have reproached. But now it was all changed, and she cowered as she thought of the pity and pain in his voice when he said, "God bless you, little Ann." What could he think of her? Mrs. Sydney had said that all the world would say she was marrying Mr. Loxton for his money, so perhaps Will would think so too. Never for a moment, even in her greatest pain, did Ann think of making any difference with Mr. Loxton. She could not quite trust herself just then to think of the future, that had seemed so simple and plain, and not devoid of brightness that morning, and now had suddenly become dark and dreary, almost beyond endurance; but she never for a moment told herself that it was not yet too late; that, as Mrs. Sydney said, the old man would not keep her to her promise, and that even now she might be free and set everything right. No, the only feeling was that it was too late, too late.

When she sat up after a time she was stiff and cramped, and her dress was wet with the heavy dew, and she sat for some time looking at the cobwebs on the blackberry bushes, with a dull inattention, and might have sat on in the same listless, lifeless stupor if a sudden idea had not come into her mind.

She would see him once more, just to make sure

how he looked, and to know that he was just as she remembered him, not changed or altered ; perhaps it might be easier then to go back to Carbury and to take up the cross she had laid on her own wretched shoulders.

It must be nearly three o'clock, she told herself, from the position of the sun. He would not have gone yet. There was a train, she knew, leaving Carbury about four for the Weymouth line, and she remembered a place on the road between Paston and Carbury where the trees grew thickly on either side of the road, and where she might easily find a hiding-place from whence she might, unnoticed, see him drive past. It could only be for a moment, but that would be something to carry in her heart through her long life.

But fate was kinder to Ann than she expected, and allowed her more than the momentary glimpse she would have had if he had driven by, for which Ann thought it worth while to push her way through a tangled hedge and to stand for half an hour among the clammy bushes with her feet sunk in mud.

The vicarage pony-carriage came past, driven by the old gardener, and conveying Mrs. Sydney, little Tom, and the nurse, and Ann's heart had hardly time to sink with the disappointment of finding that Will was not there, when he came in sight, walking with that same long stride that carried him over the ground so fast, without any appearance of haste. She could see him quite plainly as he came up, or at least she might have done so if the treacherous tears had not rushed into her eyes, as if on purpose to

spoil the mental photograph she was trying to take to last her through the long empty years that lay before her, but she could see that he was looking older, and oh, how sad! No wonder the tears came into Ann's eyes at the sight.

He had a flower or something in his button-hole, she noticed, and just as he was opposite to where Ann stood, he stopped and took it out, and she saw that it was a colored bramble leaf, just such a one — could it possibly be the same? — as she had picked that morning on her way to the vicarage, and had dropped in the drawing-room when she went away.

He stood looking at it for a moment, and then took out his pocket-book and laid it tenderly, almost reverently, between the leaves, as one lays to rest some one dead and very dear, and before he closed it, he looked at something else in the book which had lain there now for ten years, unknown to any one but himself. Ann could not see what it was that he looked at with that strange yearning look, and perhaps if she had, that curly lock of dark hair, touched at the edge with gold, might not have recalled to her mind, as it did to Will's, the little sitting-room at Paragon Terrace, and Tom's teasing look, and a little, flushed, excited girl's face, with the hair cut short on one temple; but Will saw it all as plainly as he had done when he looked up from his newspaper that afternoon to see the cause of Tom's sudden outcry, and the reason for the obscuring of the money article. But Ann could only hear the sigh he gave as he closed the pocket-book and put it back in his pocket. And then he went on past the thick-

growing covert, where the leaves were all glowing with russet and yellow and red, and where something stirred as he passed — a bird, perhaps, or a rabbit, or a dry branch falling, anything he would have thought of sooner than a girl stretching out her hands to him in mute, despairing farewell.

“ Why, Ann, wherever have you been? ” It was quite dark when Ann came into the little room where Hal and his grandfather sat in the glow of the fire, with the tea spread on the table. “ Grandy would not have tea in till you came, though I knew you would be having a cup at Filbert Farm, and would not like him to wait. We knew you were not at the vicarage, for I met Mrs. Sydney in the town just now, and she said you left before lunch. Have you had any dinner? Are n’t you dreadfully hungry? Where have you been? ”

Ann had slipped into the house a quarter of an hour before without having been heard by Hal, and had changed her dress and washed her face, and removed, as far as possible, all outward sign of the conflict that had raged as she lay face downwards in the wet grass, or crouched among the underwood in the covert. She even put on a bright ribbon at the throat, and arranged her hair with extra care, and looked quite a long time at herself in the glass, though vanity had never been one of our poor, little Ann’s failings. It was with a sort of wonder that she looked to see that it was really much the same face that she had seen reflected there that morning, and Hal, observant as he was, evidently saw no change in her as she stood in the firelight.

But another pair of eyes, though dimmed with old age, seemed keener where Ann was concerned, for they followed her with a wistful, questioning look that made her at last take refuge behind his chair, to be out of range of them, while she answered or parried Hal's questions.

"You should not have waited for me," she said; "you must both be starved. It was very wrong of me to be so late."

"Yes, tha was just what I said," said Hal; "but Grandy wouldn't hear a word of it. We had quite a row," the boy went on, in a pretended aside to Ann; "he was tired to death of me, and his hand was aching and bad, but he would n't let me rub it. I tell you what it is, Ann, it does n't do for you to be so long away, that's very plain."

"Is it?" said Ann, "I never will be again."

And then she drew a footstool to the old man's side and took his poor, numbed hand in hers very tenderly.

"Have you missed me?" she said. "Have I been too long away? Has it ached very much?"

Was it taking up her cross again when Ann took the stiff, chill, cold hand into her warm, young one? If so, there was balm and healing in that very cross itself, as, indeed, there is in many another, coming, no doubt, from one that was "for the healing of the nations." I do not know if Ann's gentle rubbing soothed and comforted the paralyzed hand, though Mr. Loxton said it did, but I know that it soothed and comforted Ann's own heart, that had seemed cold and stiff and numb and aching.

CHAPTER XXIII.

EVENING AT THE MILL.

It was perhaps the happiest thing that could have befallen, as far as Ann was concerned, that for the days following Will Garnett's visit to Paston Vicarage, Mr. Loxton was so ill again that her mind was almost entirely taken up with cares for her patient, and her nursing powers were again called into requisition.

Ann declared that this relapse was due to the change in the weather, which had become suddenly cold, and she was the more positive about it to comfort Hal, who had dark misgivings that it was the result of some neglect of his the day that Ann was out.

The doctor could not exactly say what was wrong, except increased weakness and want of energy, and a nervous dislike to any exertion ; but the old man had rallied so wonderfully after his first attack that there seemed no reason at first why he should not get over this, which was really nothing to be alarmed at, and yet he felt anxious, and so did Ann, though she scolded Hal for being so.

Mr. and Mrs. Sydney came down to Carbury the following day, but they found Mr. Loxton so ill that afternoon, that they forgot the expostulations and arguments they had come armed with, and as the

Vicar sat in the quiet little room by the old man's side, the talk naturally turned away from affairs of this life, which seemed too short and transitory to take any thought for, to the other life, so very near and real, where "they neither marry nor are given in marriage." The dusk of the night, when no man can work, seemed already gathering round the old man; the roar and fret of the tide of life was ebbing away from him, who had spent seventy-three years in the midst of it, and leaving him stranded on that silent shore, "beside the still waters." There seemed a quietness in that room in spite of the noise and rattle of the machinery, and the stir and movement of the mill close by, like the hush in a city churchyard, even with the ceaseless traffic of the streets streaming by close at hand, as if the long-forgotten dust below were listening for the trumpet to sound.

Mrs. Sydney, too, was too deeply absorbed in initiating Ann into the mysteries of making calf's-foot jelly, to remember any of the very excellent and wise advice she had prepared to administer, and perhaps, too, Ann's white face and pleading eyes made her more an object for comforting than for lecturing.

It was also a great comfort to Ann that, in consequence of Mr. Loxton's illness, Hal's going to school was definitely postponed, at any rate till Christmas. The boy's distress was so great at the prospect of leaving his grandfather, and the old man was so desponding of ever seeing him again if he went away, that Ann was only too glad to agree to

his staying, all her own wishes being on the same side ; and Hal solemnly promised that the time should not be lost, and that he would work his very hardest, both with Mr. Sydney and at home.

In those short, bright October days, with the frosts in the morning and the mists in the evening, and the yellow leaves falling, falling so quietly, Michael Loxton failed more and more. Every day almost made him more dependent and feeble ; a shorter time each day could be spent in his office, till at last Ann persuaded him not to go at all, but to have his letters brought into the house and give his instructions to Mr. Jones, the managing clerk, who had come greatly to the fore during the old man's illness, and was a kind, worthy soul, anxious to save the master in every way. The old man was soon tired, each day there were fewer turns up and down on the sunny side of the mill, and an unconsciously heavier leaning on Ann's shoulder, as they paced. The men watched him, as he passed, with undisguised pity and rough open sympathy, all of the gloomy sort, that in that class is the only sympathy that passes current, anything the least cheerful or hopeful being regarded as heartless and unfeeling.

" You be looking mortal bad, 's mornin', sir," or, " Me and my mates has been saying as how you're a burden to see ;" and they did not wait till he was out of hearing to prophesy that, " He ain't long for this world ;" " He won't be keeping Christmas along of us ;" " There's death wrote in his face, and no mistake ;" till Ann would turn

savagely on them and bid them leave off croaking, and glance anxiously at the patient, gray old face to see if he had heard.

Ann was the only person who either could not or would not see how quickly the old man was treading the path down to the dark river. She argued even with the doctor himself, that he was not nearly so bad as he was after his first attack ; that it was only the cold weather that kept him indoors ; that it was wisdom, not weakness, that made him take less and less exercise. She gave such cheerful accounts of his progress to any one who asked after him, that if they did not see him, they were almost persuaded that he was really getting better. She scolded Hal quite fiercely for noticing how one thing after another was given up, and she was quite cross with him one night when he cried because the old man was too tired to finish the game of cribbage.

“ How can you be such a baby, Hal ? ” she said, with rather quivering lips ; “ it’s so silly to care so much about a game.”

“ It’s not that,” sobbed Hal, indignantly bolting out of the room.

But Ann’s own eyes were red, and she was very tender to Hal, when she found the old cribbage board carefully put away in his bedroom, with the pegs still marking the place where the game had stopped.

Michael Loxton had never been a great talker and now he was more silent than ever, and would sit for hours sometimes without speaking in that large arm-chair, dozing, or watching the fire, while

Ann would gently rub his hand or read to him, or sing to him ; and now the Irish songs had given place to hymns, soft, little hymns about heaven, "the land of pure delight," and "the sweet fields beyond the swelling flood." And sometimes his eyes would study Ann's face, which, to be sure, was very white and sad just then, with the same questioning, wistful look that they had done when she came in that evening in the fire-light, and had had to draw back out of their range to avoid their urgency.

"Ann," he said once, "what is it, my dear ? Can't I help you ? You do so much for me."

And she answered with a passion of tears, "Only get well, dear, only get well."

And sometimes she would feel an impulse to answer the question in his eyes and tell him all about it, and when the words were almost trembling on her lips, she would catch them back. Why should he be troubled ? No, he should never know, and when he was better they would be married just the same as if she still believed Will to be as fickle as she once fancied him. Come what might, she would be true to the promise she gave of her own freewill, almost unasked, to the old man, who had been so good to her, and who was so dependent on her care.

One afternoon Mrs. Sydney came in to ask for Mr. Loxton, and as he was pretty well, and Ann was anxious to impress Mrs. Sydney with the fact, she brought her in to see him.

The dusk was closing in, and Mrs. Sydney had a good deal to talk to Ann about, and, after five min-

utes' very constrained conversation with the old man, with whom Mrs. Sydney had never had much in common, she drew her chair nearer Ann, and plunged into that never-failing subject of interest to clergymen's wives, parochial affairs, while the old man dozed off. He was so quiet with his head resting back in the shadow, that Ann felt sure that he was asleep, or at any rate that their talk did not tire him; and by and by, when Mrs. Sydney began to talk about the Garnetts, she felt glad that he should not hear.

"What a nice young fellow Will Garnett is, Ann," Mrs. Sydney said, "and quite good-looking; don't you think so?"

"Yes, rather."

"Well, perhaps he is not regularly handsome, and I think, as a boy, Tom was best looking."

"Was he?"

"But he's very nice all the same. I took quite a fancy to him, Ann. I don't think he's very strong, and he's a little bit absent-minded sometimes. That day he came down, I found out several times that he had not been paying attention to something I had been telling him, though he has those sort of eyes that seem to be drinking in every word one says, and he'd say 'yes,' and 'to be sure,' every now and then. But I set it all down to his having had some sort of disappointment, though I quite forget now what it was. I'd quite forgotten till you came in that day that you used to know the Garnetts, and I am so very glad you came in by chance; it was evidently quite a pleasure to Will to meet you again, though

you would hurry away so fast, though, of course," Mrs. Sydney said, lowering her voice and glancing at the silent figure in the arm-chair, "you had something else to think of. He told me a good deal about Tom and his wife, and the children, and I've promised some day to go up for a day or two and see Mrs. Garnett. They have a nice house, he says, in Sinclair Street, Westbourne Park. Number nine I think it is. I think it is such a pity Will does not marry," Mrs. Sydney went on. When she was once started on a subject of interest, she did not want much encouragement in the way of answers, though, as in poor Will Garnett's case, she generally found out when people's attention wandered; and Ann certainly was not open to this accusation, for her attention was almost painfully concentrated, as she sat on a low stool by the hearth, with her elbow on her knee, and her chin on her hand, and the full firelight falling on her face and into the depths of her great eyes.

Mrs. Sydney was short-sighted, and not given to reading faces, as Ann knew, or else perhaps Ann might have been as guarded in her looks as she was in the composed, indifferent, and yet sufficiently interested, little answers which filled up any pauses in Mrs. Sydney's words.

"It seemed such a pity that he should spoil his whole life for the sake of one girl's bad behavior. I shall ask Mrs. Garnett all about it when I write. He's not at all gloomy, you know, Ann, and I'm sure he made me laugh more than I have for a long time, by all he remembered of the monkey tricks he

and Tom used to be up to, when they lived here ; but every now and then he speaks rather bitterly about things as if, you know, he had rather lost faith in people, and disbelieved in friendship and pure motives, and that sort of thing. He asked a great deal about you, Ann, and said that his mother used to be quite fond of you. When you knew them, was there any girl to whom Will was attached ? or was it since you lost sight of them ? ”

A coal had fallen out of the fire, and Ann was busy picking it up, so she failed in answering the last question.

“ She must have been a stupid sort of girl, if she did not like Will, he is altogether so nice and superior, and so good, too, she can’t be worth spoiling his whole life about. I hope he will soon forget her.”

“ Yes,” said Ann, softly, “ I hope so.”

Soon after this, Mrs. Sydney left, and as Mr. Loxton made no movement, she thought he was still sleeping, and went out quietly so as not to disturb him, and Ann came back after seeing her out, and sat down again in her old place by the fire, looking again into those glowing caverns, where so many eyes have looked for comfort, or memory, or anticipation. Her thoughts were so far away from the quiet, old room, with the autumn wind sighing sadly outside ; away under the apple-trees and the blue sky, with the larks singing overhead, and they came back with a start and a shiver as a voice said, “ Poor, little Ann ! ” and she became conscious that Michael Loxton was watching her from his dark corner with

an intense scrutiny, that made the color rush up into her cheeks, and her heart sink and flutter, with the thought that he might have read all that she had been thinking of in her unconscious face.

“Are you awake, dear?” she said. “I thought you were having such a nice nap, and I would not move to disturb you.”

And he said nothing, but from something he told Hal when he came in, Ann found that he had heard more of Mrs. Sydney’s parochial chatter than she fancied, and she wondered if he had heard what she said about the Garnetts, and if there could be any connection between that and the “Poor, little Ann!” which he repeated softly to himself more than once that evening.

“Ann,” Hal said, later in the evening, coming after her into the kitchen, where she was preparing Mr. Loxton’s supper, which she liked to do with her own hands, “Ann, Grandy is trying to write something, and his hand is so weak, and he won’t let me do it for him. Do come and persuade him not to, he is worrying himself over it.”

The old man’s hand had become so much weaker during the last week or two, that he had given up attempting to use it in writing, except to trace a laborious signature to any papers which Mr. Jones brought in, and to which his signature was absolutely necessary, and Ann had got to dread even this, as the effort was so great, and the old man so tired and depressed after it.

But now he had made Hal bring the writing-materials, and was trying painfully to write a letter;

but when Ann came in at Hal's entreaty he had already given it up, and had torn up the letter he had begun, and was leaning back, looking sorrowfully at the useless hand that would no longer obey its owner's will. But he would not let Ann write for him, or even tell her what he wished to write.

He had such a bad night, that night, so restless and disturbed, and talked constantly about writing, about some letter that must be sent, about something to be set right, and Ann grew at last to think that his mind was wandering a little. But to satisfy him, she brought the writing-materials as soon as it grew light, and put them by his side, and gradually, a few words at a time, through the day he wrote the letter. It took him nearly all day, and more than once he had almost given it up in despair, and Ann entreated him to leave it till he was better, or to let her write it, if it must be done, and once Ann appealed to the doctor as to whether they had not better take the pen and paper away, and try and induce him to think of something else; but he said that in his present condition it was not safe to thwart him, and that it was best to let him have his way. But at last it was done, only a few lines after all, straggling crookedly across the sheet of paper, and Ann wondered sadly if the result of all that toil would be legible or intelligible to the receiver.

“Shall I direct it?” she said, as the old man folded it and put it into an envelope.

“No,” he said, “there's no hurry.”

And yet a few minutes later she met Hal running off to the post-office with the letter in his hand.

"Grandy wants me to post this at once, though it's not nearly post-time. He says I'm to be as quick as I can. But, Ann, it won't go any earlier, will it?"

"No," she said, "but never mind. Is it properly directed?"

"Yes, I wrote the direction," and off the boy ran.

Ann thought nothing more of that letter. Indeed, her thoughts were fully occupied ; for, although Michael Loxton seemed much better directly after the letter was despatched, and had a quiet night, there was such an evident increase of weakness next day, that even Ann could not shut her eyes to the fact that there must be danger in such great prostration.

He sat all day in the arm-chair, only half conscious, and Ann hardly left his side ; but towards the evening he got more restless, and seemed listening for something, reminding Ann of that first morning of his illness, when he listened for the mill-bell. It could not be that now, and once she asked him if he wanted anybody, if it was Dr. Briggs, or Mr. Sydney, but he shook his head. She tried reading to him, and through it all she felt he was listening for something outside, and once he stopped her with his hand raised to keep silence.

And so she, also, fell silent and unconsciously listened too. The work of the mill was over, the great wheel no longer turned, the throb and jar of the engines had ceased, and the grating rattle of the chain as the big sacks swung up on the windlass ;

the rolling of the wagon wheels on the rough stones of the yard, and the stamp of horses' feet, and jingle of the harness and the sounds of locking up, bolts shut and shutters falling to, and the voices of the men, all had died away, and now there was silence in the old mill, such silence that Ann could hear the yard-dog yawn and shake his chain. The distant sounds from the town, a passing cart, or the bark of a dog, or a whistle from the station only made the silence immediately round them more intense.

Hal had taken his book into the kitchen, the strain was almost too much for the boy's spirits, and Ann was glad to persuade him to go away from the silent room into other company, if it was only among the mill-men, or to sit with Mrs. Stokes in the kitchen.

Suddenly the old man drew himself up, listening with more attention.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"He is coming," he said, "I knew he would."

A footstep was coming along the mill lane, an unaccustomed hand was feeling awkwardly for the latch of the gate, the yard-dog was barking furiously at the entrance of a stranger, and then some one was at the door talking in low tones.

"He is come in time," said the old man, "thank God! God bless you, little Ann!"

And as Will Garnett came into the room, Michael Loxton died very quietly, just a drooping of the gray head on Ann's shoulder, just a long sigh, such as tired children give when they are hushed to sleep on their mother's breast; and Ann loved to remember that he went with her name on his lips, linked with

a blessing, across “the swelling flood,” into “the land of pure delight.”

“ Will,” Ann used to say, “ I wonder if I shall love you half as much when you are seventy-two as I loved Michael Loxton?”

“ Suppose we wait and see,” was always Will’s answer.

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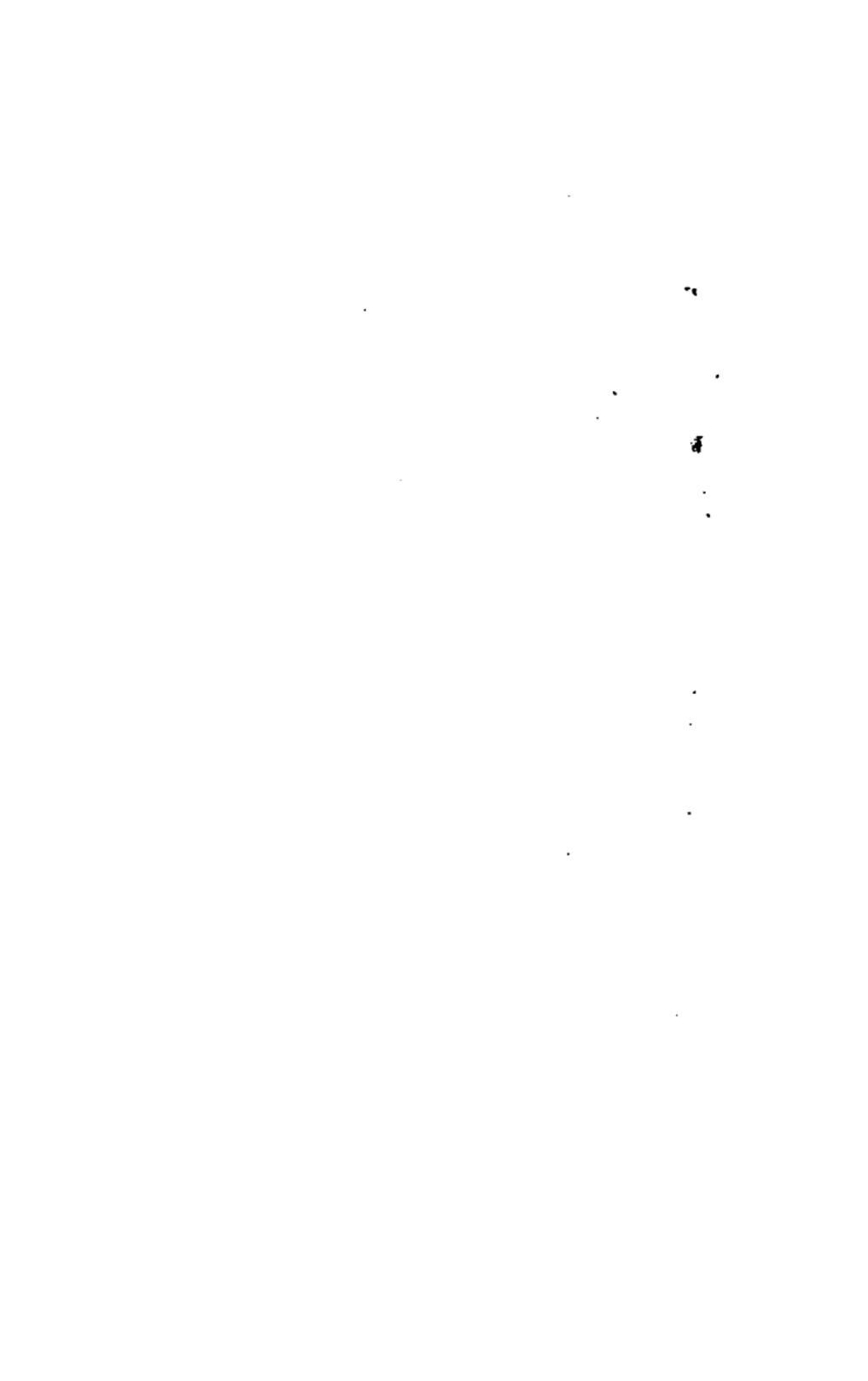
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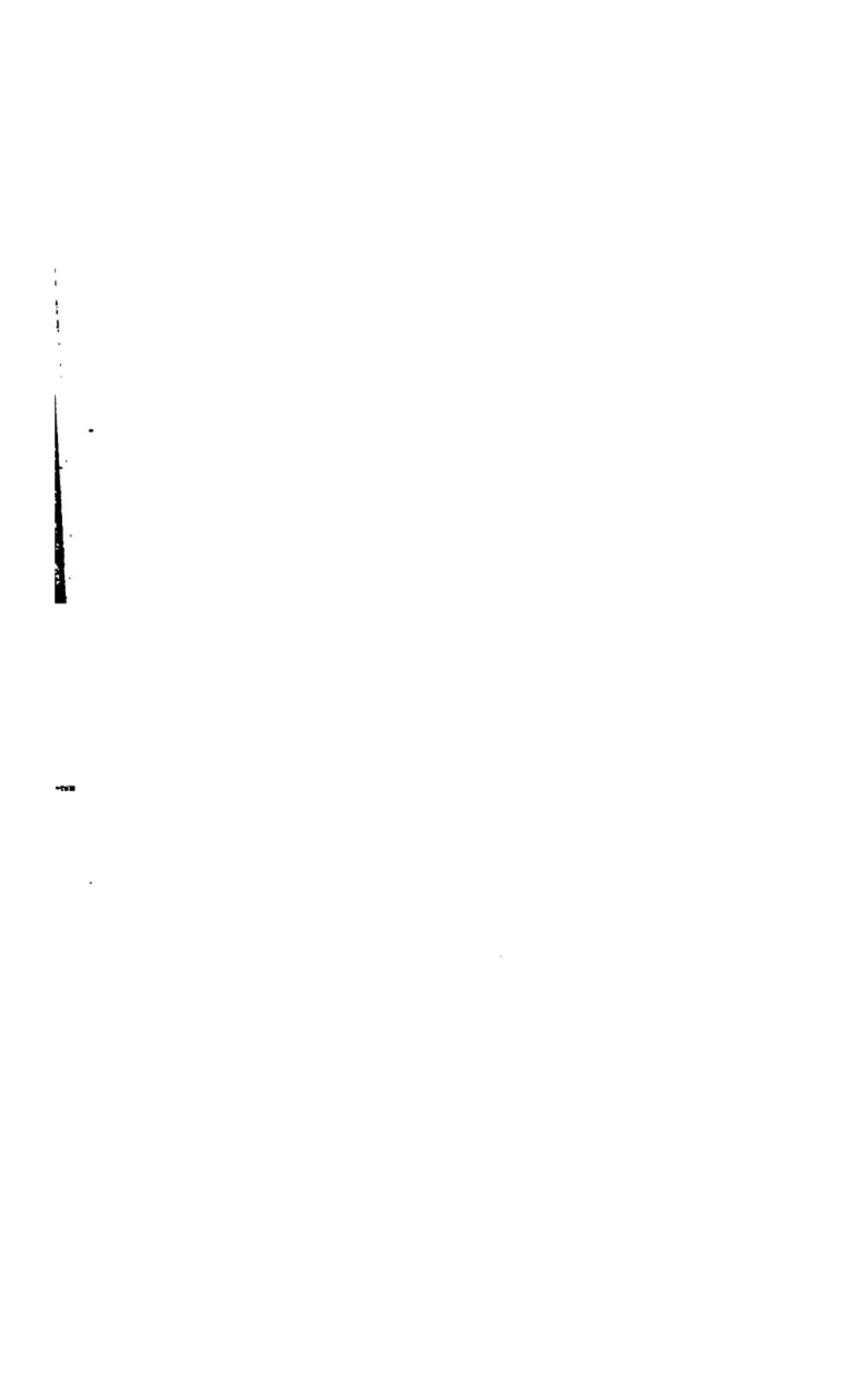
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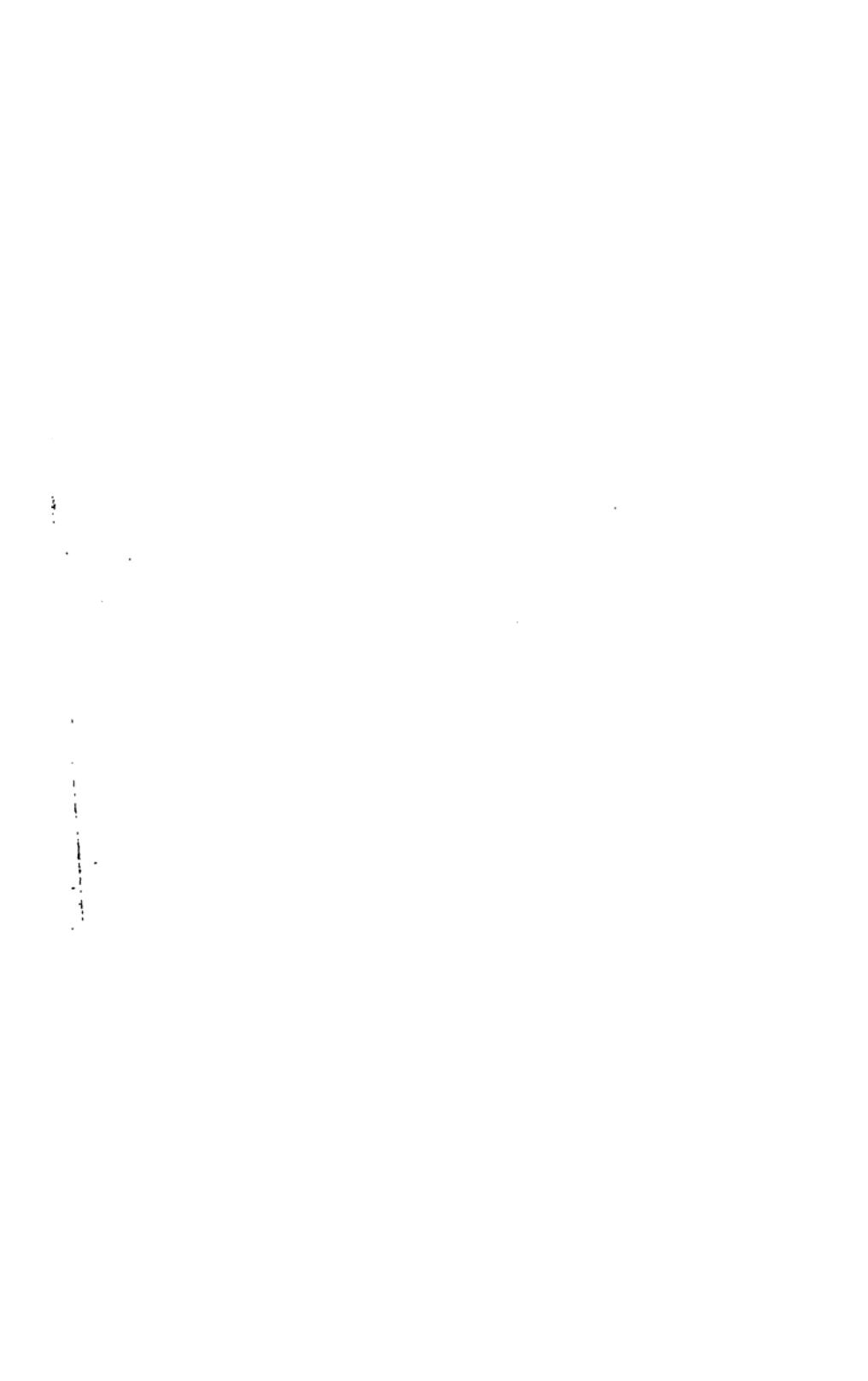
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